



*Edited by*  
*Daniel Breazeale*  
*and*  
*Tom Rockmore*

FICHTE'S  
VOCATION  
OF  
MAN

NEW INTERPRETIVE  
AND  
CRITICAL ESSAYS

## Fichte's *Vocation of Man*



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New Interpretive and Critical Essays

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Daniel Breazeale  
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P R E S S

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# Key to Abbreviations

AA	<i>Immanuel Kants gesammelte Schriften</i> (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1902 ff.)
AD	<i>J. G. Fichte and the Atheism Dispute (1798–1800)</i> , ed. and trans. Curtis Bowman, ed. and commentary by Yolanda Estes (Burlington, VT, and Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2010)
BM	<i>Fichte, Die Bestimmung des Menschen</i> (1800)
BM(pb)	<i>Fichte, Die Bestimmung des Menschen</i> , ed. Fritz Medicus and Erich Fuchs (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1979)
BWL	<i>Fichte, Ueber den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre</i> (1794)
EPW	<i>Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings</i> , ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988)
FiG	<i>Fichte in Gespräch</i> , ed. Erich Fuchs (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1980)
FNR	<i>Fichte, Foundations of Natural Right</i> , ed. Frederick Neuhouser, trans. Michael Baur (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000)
FTP	<i>Fichte: Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (Wissenschaftslehre) nova methodo</i> , ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992)
GA	<i>J. G. Fichte-Gesamtausgabe der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften</i> , ed. Erich Fuchs, Reinhard Lauth,† and Hans Gliwitzky† (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1964ff.)
GG	<i>Fichte, Über den Grund unseres Glaubens an eine göttliche Weltregierung</i> (1798)
GNR	<i>Fichte, Grundlage des Naturrechts</i> (1796/97)



GWL	Fichte, <i>Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre</i> (1794/95)
IWL	Fichte, <i>Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings</i> , ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994)
KpV	Kant, <i>Kritik der praktischen Vernunft</i> (1788)
KrV	Kant, <i>Kritik der reinen Vernunft</i> . As is customary, references to KrV will be simply to the page numbers of the A (1781) and B (1787) eds.
KU	Kant, <i>Kritik der Urteilskraft</i> (1790).
P	Kant, <i>Prolegomena zu einer jeden künftigen Metaphysik, die als Wissenschaft wird auftreten können</i> (1781)
SE	Fichte, <i>System of Ethics</i> , ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale and Günter Zöller (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)
SK	Fichte, <i>The Science of Knowledge</i> , ed. and trans. Peter Heath and John Lachs (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982)
SS	Fichte, <i>System der Sittenlehre</i> (1798)
SW	Johann Gottlieb Fichtes <i>sämmtliche Werke</i> , ed. I. H. Fichte, eight vols. (Berlin: Viet & Co., 1845–46); rpt., along with the three vols. of <i>Johann Gottlieb Fichtes nachgelassene Werke</i> (Bonn: Adolphus-Marcus, 1834–35), as <i>Fichtes Werke</i> (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1971)
WLnm[H]	Fichte, <i>Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo</i> (“Halle Nachschrift,” 1796/97)
WLnm[K]	Fichte, <i>Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo</i> (“Krause Nachschrift,” 1798/99)
VM	Fichte, <i>The Vocation of Man</i> , trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987)
VM(LLA)	Fichte, <i>The Vocation of Man</i> , trans. William Smith, ed. Roderick Chisholm (Indianapolis: Library of Liberal Arts/Bobbs-Merrill, 1956)
VM(PW)	Fichte, <i>The Vocation of Man</i> , trans. William Smith, in Vol. I of <i>The Popular Works of Johann Gottlieb Fichte</i> (London, Trübner & Co., 4 <sup>th</sup> ed., 1889).

# Preface

This volume collects seventeen previously unpublished essays by an international group of scholars, all focusing upon different aspects of and offering diverse perspectives upon a single, seminal text, J. G. Fichte's "popular" tract of 1800, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*.<sup>1</sup> *The Vocation of Man* has been translated into English no fewer than three times, first in 1846 by Percy Sennet, then again in 1848 by William Smith, whose translation was subsequently revised and reissued on several different occasions, and most recently, in 1987, by Peter Preuss.<sup>2</sup> Though it is unquestionably the best known of Fichte's writings among Anglophone readers and students of German Idealism, there is in fact and has long been a great deal of controversy among Fichte scholars concerning its significance and its relationship to Fichte's other, less popular—or, as he himself would have put it, more "scientific"—treatises, especially the various versions of his distinctive philosophical system, the so-called *Wissenschaftslehre* or "doctrine of

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1. All of these essays are revised versions of papers that were originally presented at the Tenth Biennial Meeting of the North American Fichte Society, held April 27–30, 2010, in Lisbon, Portugal, with the generous support of the *Unidade de Investigação LIF* (Universidade de Coimbra), the *Centro de Estudos Filosóficos* (Faculdade de Ciências Sociais e Humanas/Universidade Nova de Lisboa), the *Fundação Engenheiro António de Almeida*, and the *Fundação Luso-Americana*.

2. J. G. Fichte, *The Destination of Man*, trans. Mrs. Percy Sinnett (London: John Chapman, 1846); J. G. Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, trans. William Smith (London: John Chapman, 1848), 265–554; 2nd., substantially rev. ed. in *Johann Gottlieb Fichte's Popular Works* (London: Trübner, 1873), 233–379 (later reissued several times as a single volume, *The Vocation of Man*, with an introduction by E. Ritchie [LaSalle, IL: Open Court, 1906, 1931, 1965]); 3rd. rev. ed. in *The Popular Works of Johann Gottlieb Fichte* (London: Trübner, 1889), 319–478 (further rev. and with an introduction by Roderick Chisholm [Indianapolis: Library of Liberal Arts/Bobbs-Merrill, 1956]; J. G. Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987).

scientific knowledge.” These issues are summarized in Daniel Breazeale’s introductory essay on the history of the reception of this text.

This volume aims to illuminate *The Vocation of Man* by exploring some of the issues and controversies that have surrounded it from the start and by offering fresh and varied examples of contemporary scholarly approaches to the same. A number of these essays directly address the question of precisely what *kind* of work this is and propose a variety of different *contexts* within which it might be understood. Günter Zöller offers a “theological-political” interpretation of *The Vocation of Man*; Benjamin Crowe and Elizabeth Millán propose two different readings of it as philosophical “novel” or *Bildungsroman*; Michael Steinberg offers a “performative” interpretation of Fichte’s text as a device for initiating readers into a liminal state beyond mere knowledge; whereas Yolanda Estes situates the task of *The Vocation of Man* squarely in the context of the immediately preceding “Atheism Controversy” and stresses its continuity with Fichte’s earlier philosophy, albeit in a new communicative register.

Other authors address specific, often neglected themes in this work. Mário Jorge de Almeida Carvalho calls attention to the crucial function of “human interest” in the rhetorical strategy of Book One of *The Vocation of Man*; Wayne Martin examines the dialectical tension between personal self-determination and objective evidence in Fichte’s account of judgment in this work; Tom Rockmore argues that Fichte’s account of practical reason in *The Vocation of Man* represents something of a retreat from his earlier advances upon Kant’s conception of the same; David W. Wood examines Fichte’s conception of “infinity” in this work; Kien-How Goh analyzes Fichte’s new understanding of human “community” in *The Vocation of Man* and indicates how this differs from his earlier account of the same in his *System of Ethics*; Jane Dryden explores Fichte’s distinction between physical and moral evil in *The Vocation of Man* and how this is related to his view of personal responsibility; and Daniel Breazeale offers a highly critical reading of the “argument of belief” in Book Three and argues that this signals a fateful turning point in Fichte’s intellectual development.

A third group of essays investigates the relationship between the views expressed in *The Vocation of Man* and those of various other thinkers: Kant, in the case of Angelica Nuzzo, with respect to their respective notions of freedom and determination; Jacobi, in the case of Violetta Waibel, with special attention to the difficult notion of the “original thinking power of nature”; Schelling, in the case of Michael Vater, with particular reference to the relation of Fichte’s views concerning personal agency to those expressed in Schelling’s *System of Transcendental Idealism*; Hegel, in the case of Marco Ivaldo, who examines the criticisms of Fichte proffered in *Knowledge and*

*Belief* and explores the underlying roots of the differences between these two thinkers; and Arnold Farr raises anew the question of the “vocation of man” from the perspective of contemporary postmodernism and contrasts the latter’s deconstruction of the subject with Fichte’s radically original view of the same.

Taken collectively, it is our hope that these essays can serve as a useful supplement to the reading and study of *The Vocation of Man* and that they will furnish readers and students with stimulating new insights, while better apprising them of some of the controversies that have long surrounded this work and acquainting them with certain overlooked difficulties implicit in or raised by this familiar but not always well-understood text. As this collection vividly demonstrates, for a book addressed to “anyone capable of understanding a book at all,” *The Vocation of Man* has proven itself to be open to an unusually large and sometimes perplexing variety of sometimes opposing interpretations and criticisms. To come to terms with this variety and to confront these criticisms is an essential element of what it means to philosophize “in the spirit of Fichte,” and we very much hope these essays will help promulgate this virtue.

Daniel Breazeale  
Tom Rockmore  
Co-Positors, North American Fichte Society



## Introduction

# The Checkered Reception of Fichte's *Vocation of Man*

DANIEL BREAZEALE

*The Vocation of Man* was published in January 1800, barely a year after the events of the “atheism controversy” that transfixed a large portion of the contemporary German reading public and eventually led to Fichte’s dismissal from his professorship in Jena.<sup>1</sup> In this book, which is explicitly addressed not to professional philosophers but to “anyone capable of understanding a book,” Fichte is clearly trying to set the record straight and to present a broadly accessible account of his own system, the so-called *Wissenschaftslehre* or “doctrine of scientific knowledge,” an account designed to defend the transcendental idealism of the latter against the competing claims of dogmatic realism and to emphasize the *moral* foundations of the former and its compatibility with popular religious sentiments. The book was a resounding literary success and received more contemporary reviews than any of Fichte’s other writings, and to this day it remains his most widely read and translated work.

This, however, is not to say that the original reception of this work was wholly positive. On the contrary, though it certainly had its enthusiastic admirers, it was greeted by many of Fichte’s philosophical allies and opponents with a certain amount of confusion and consternation, as is exemplified in Schleiermacher’s scathingly ironic review in the Schlegel

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1. For a detailed account of these events and discussion of the significance of the same, see Yolanda Estes, “Commentator’s Introduction: J. G. Fichte, *Atheismstreit*, *Wissenschaftslehre*, and *Religionslehre*,” in *J. G. Fichte and the Atheism Dispute (1798–1800)*, trans. Curtis Bowman (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2010).

brothers' *Athenaeum*, which parodies the form and style of *The Vocation of Man*.<sup>2</sup> Many of Fichte's contemporaries were surprised—sometimes pleasantly, sometimes not—by what they took to be his radical departure in this work from the idealism of the earlier *Wissenschaftslehre* and by his adoption, in Book III, of what appears to be a dualistic metaphysical realism. Thus, Fichte's old acquaintance from Zurich, Jens Baggesen, writing to Jacobi, expressed his astonishment at the way “each line of this book refutes the *Wissenschaftslehre*” (the standpoint of which Baggesen, like so many others, associated with Book II) and added that “it is edifying to see such an old sinner undergo such a sudden conversion.”<sup>3</sup> This is also how the book was understood by Jacobi himself, whose public criticism of the *Wissenschaftslehre* as speculative “nihilism” seems to have been at least partially responsible for Fichte's decision to publish this new, “popular” presentation of his philosophy. Indeed, Jacobi even went so far (in a letter to Jean Paul) as to accuse Fichte of plagiarizing from his own “philosophy of belief,”<sup>4</sup> and he complained (with justification) that Book III employs a vocabulary and manner of expression uncomfortably close to Jacobi's own.

Rather than viewing *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* as making a sharp break with Fichte's earlier philosophy, other contemporary readers simply interpreted the latter in the light of the former. Thus, Hegel based many of his familiar criticisms of Fichte's “subjective idealism” and “philosophy of reflection” upon his critical reading of this popular work of 1800, in which he claimed to find not just an objectionably one-sided variety of transcendental idealism, but also an insurmountable and philosophically untenable epistemological dualism of knowledge and belief, as well as a pernicious metaphysical dualism of sensible and supersensible worlds.<sup>5</sup> Schelling agreed

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2. Schleiermacher's *Athenaeum* review is republished, along with the other thirteen contemporary reviews, in *Fichte in Rezension*, ed. Erich Fuchs, Wilhelm G. Jacobs, and Walter Schieche (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1995), Vol. 3, 1–173. In his letter of June 28, 1800, to A. W. Schlegel, Schleiermacher describes *The Vocation of Man* as “a tricky and cursed book” (*ein verwickeltes verdammtes Buch*) (in FiG, vol. 2, 360).

3. Baggesen to Jacobi, April 22, 1800 (FiG, vol. 2, 328–29). In an earlier letter to Jacobi (April 14, 1800), Baggesen expresses his enthusiasm for *The Vocation of Man*, as well as his “astonishment” at the way the this book seems to directed “against the previous Fichte” (FiG, vol. 2, 323–24).

4. F. H. Jacobi to Jean Paul, March 16, 1800 (FiG, vol. 2, 308–309).

5. Though Hegel's criticisms of Fichte's philosophy in general and of *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* in particular occur over and over again in his writings, these seldom go beyond those first articulated in 1801 in the “*Darstellung des Fichteschen Systems*” in the second part of his *Differenz des Fichteschen und Schellingischen Systems der Philosophie* and in 1802 in Part C of *Glauben und Wissen*. See *The Difference between Fichte's and Schelling's System of Philosophy*, trans. H. S. Harris and Walter Cerf (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977) and *Faith and Knowledge*, trans. H. S. Harris and Walter Cerf (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977).

that *The Vocation of Man* was an expression of “the lifeblood of Fichte’s philosophy,” while fully endorsing Hegel’s harsh criticism of the same in *Faith and Knowledge*.<sup>6</sup>

The subsequent scholarly literature on Fichte displays a similar ambivalence concerning the significance of *The Vocation of Man*. Indeed, many Fichte scholars and students of German Idealism appear to harbor something of a love/hate relationship with this work. One cannot help but admire its bold rhetorical strategy: the way it begins with a gripping depiction of the same existential dilemma that Fichte himself had experienced just prior to his “discovery” of Kant at the age of twenty-eight, when he was overwhelmed by the sharp conflict between the demands of his “heart” and his “head,” between a burning desire to affirm his own freedom and an intellectual conscience that could recognize only the rule of external necessity; the way this dilemma is temporarily resolved by dissolving reality itself into a play of mere representations, an “unbearable lightness of being” that defuses the threat of determinism but still leaves the heart yearning for meaning; and how this hunger is finally satisfied by a practical ontology that grounds all belief in reality in one’s immediate awareness of moral obligations. Of all of Fichte’s writings, this is perhaps the most artfully constructed, and Alexis Philonenko is surely right to compare it to the *Divine Comedy*, inasmuch as it conducts the reader from the hell of “doubt” through the purgatory of a one-sided “knowledge” to the final paradise of “belief.”<sup>7</sup>

But such admiration is often counterbalanced by severe reservations concerning the *philosophical content* of this work and by real confusion concerning its *proper place* within the overall development of Fichte’s philosophy. Many careful readers of Fichte’s earlier writings, for example, have been perplexed by the identification of “knowledge” in Book II with a purely formal and abstract variety of subjective idealism, which seems like nothing more than a cruel caricature of the idealism of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Even more annoying, and apparently “un-Fichtean,” is the sharp new distinction between *Wissen* and *Glaube*, “knowledge” and “belief,” and the attendant implication that one cannot consistently believe in one’s own free efficacy and moral obligations without also believing in one’s personal immortality and in the reality of a “supersensible world” governed by a providential “father of spirits.” This has led many scholars to the conclusion that something has gone deeply awry in this work, especially in Book III of the same, which seems to be brimming with metaphysical claims sharply

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6. Schelling to A. W. Schlegel, August 19, 1802 (FiG, vol. 3, 135).

7. See Alexis Philonenko, “La position systématique dans la *Destination de l’homme*,” in *Transzendentalphilosophie als System. Die Auseinandersetzung Zwischen 1794 und 1806*, ed. Albert Mues (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1989), 332.



at odds with what might be described as “the spirit of the *Wissenschaftslehre*”—or at least of the Jena version of the same.

In his magisterial 1930 study of the development of Fichte’s philosophy, Martial Gueroult, while echoing many of Hegel’s criticisms of the content of *The Vocation of Man*, does not take these criticism to apply to earlier, Jena versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre*; instead, he deploys them to support his own thesis that this popular work represents the most important *Wendung* or turning point in the internal development of Fichte’s philosophy: from the properly Critical and transcendental standpoint of the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre* to the more metaphysical and indeed mystical standpoint of his later philosophy, as expounded both in his later, unpublished lectures on the *Wissenschaftslehre* and in such later popular writings as *Die Anweisung zur seligen Leben*.<sup>8</sup>

According to Gueroult’s very influential interpretation, Fichte’s philosophy began to undergo a major change around 1798, when he suggested (in a few passages in *Das System der Sittenlehre* and in such occasional writings as *Ueber den Grund unseres Glauben in einen göttliche Weltregierung* and *Aus einem Privatschreiben*) that the I has to rely upon something outside itself in order to accomplish its moral ends. But in order to assimilate this “foreign” reality into the framework of the *Wissenschaftslehre* he had to reject or at least to modify substantially his previous commitment to the absolute self-sufficiency of the I and to the sovereign efficacy of action. It is, moreover, true that Fichte wrote to Schelling in 1800 that the *Wissenschaftslehre* required an “extension of its principles,” so that it could incorporate the “highest synthesis,” that of the spiritual world; and, as he further explained, even though he had not yet managed to incorporate these changes into a new scientific presentation of his philosophy, clear evidence of the changes he envisioned could be found in Book III of *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*.<sup>9</sup>

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8. See Marital Gueroult, *L'évolution et la structure de la doctrine de la science* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1930), 2 vols. and “La destination de l’homme,” in *Études sur Fichte* (Paris: Aubier Montaigne, 1974), 72–96.

9. Fichte to Schelling, Dec. 27, 1800. After noting that in order to clarify his opposition to Schelling’s *Naturphilosophie* he would first have to “extend the principles” of his own transcendental system, Fichte adds the following: “I have not yet been able to provide these extended principles with a scientific treatment; a clear hint regarding them may be found in the third book of my *Bestimmung des Menschen*. The working out of these principles will be my first order of business, just as soon as I have finished the new presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* [i.e., the abandoned *Neue Bearbeitung* of 1800, which began as a revision of the lectures on *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*]. What is still lacking, in a word, is a *transcendental system of the intelligible world*” (GA, III/4, 406). Note, however, that six months later, in another letter to Schelling (May 31–August 7, 1801), Fichte explicitly denies that the *Wissenschaftslehre* requires any “extension of its principles,” and maintains instead that “the *Wissenschaftslehre* is not at all lacking with respect to its principles, but it is incomplete. What is still lacking is the highest synthesis, the synthesis of the spiritual world. Just as I was preparing to make this synthesis the cry of ‘atheism’ was raised” (GA, III/5, 45).

These “changes,” according to Gueroult, amount to far more than a mere “extension” or “completion” of the Jena system; instead, they mark a “fundamental change” in Fichte’s philosophy, one that lays the foundation for all the subsequent versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Now for the first time Fichte envisions the absolute (in the guise of an infinite “pure will”) as falling *outside* the I as such, and as a result his account of the relationship between the intentions and the actions of the finite I is radically modified, as in his account of the relationships between the I and the absolute and between the sensible and supersensible worlds.<sup>10</sup> Whereas in Fichte’s earlier writings the I’s infinite quest to establish its independence was something that could occur only within the sensible world, understood as the sole venue for the actualization of the I’s supersensible nature as a free moral agent, this is no longer the case in *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*. Even though a finite being is still described as always obliged to think of its willing in relation to some intended act in the sensible world, it is now also said to be aware of its utter inability to bring about this result on its own and of its need to rely instead for the accomplishment of its ends upon an incomprehensible external force, in the reality of which it must necessarily believe. At the same time, however, this finite I can be confident that, whatever the effect of its actions within the sensible world, they nevertheless possess full efficacy within the supersensible one and, indeed, that it is only and precisely by virtue of the will’s efficacy in the latter that it can have any efficacy within the former—all of this, again, thanks not to its own power but to that of the infinite will.<sup>11</sup> From this Gueroult concludes that the I’s true end is no longer its infinite dutiful activity in the sensible world, but lies instead in its conscious recognition of its relationship to the absolute, that is, in its acquisition of an “absolute consciousness of the absolute.”<sup>12</sup>

Gueroult also sharply criticizes Fichte for abandoning his earlier claim that the I simply posits or intellectually intuit its own reality and for now maintaining instead that the reality of the I as a free subject must be described as an article of faith or belief, something possible only through an act of will. Gueroult interprets the appeal to willful belief at the beginning of Book III as providing Fichte with a “magic wand,” which he can then wave at will to establish not just the reality of the I and its sensible world, but also that of the supersensible world and of that infinite will that is the “law” of the same.<sup>13</sup>

10. Gueroult, *L'évolution et la structure de la doctrine de la science*, vol. I, 366.

11. *Ibid.*, 368–69.

12. *Ibid.*, 371; see too Gueroult, “La destination de l’homme,” 94–95.

13. “Tout est préparé pour la coup de baguette ‘magique’ qui, par l’intervention de la croyance, restaurera le réel, et un réel que ne sera plus celui du premier livre. La vraie magie n’est pas celle de Novalis, celle de l’imagination, qui est la magie des songes creux, mais celle de la croyance, source de réalité et de vie” (Gueroult, “La destination de l’homme,” 84).

In abandoning his earlier view of the I's unconditioned self-positing, Fichte, according to Gueroult, abandons entirely the standpoint of transcendental idealism, according to which all reality is always only "reality for the I." Thus, "in order to save idealism, Fichte had to become a realist. He had never been closer to Jacobi."<sup>14</sup> Like so many other commentators, Gueroult attributes this alleged transformation of Fichte's philosophy to the direct influence of the Atheism Controversy and, more specifically, to Jacobi's "Open Letter" of 1799 and Schleiermacher's *Über die Religion*, which was also published that same year. It is certainly true that Fichte had long been a sincere admirer of Jacobi and that as early as 1795 he had proposed an "alliance" (*Bündniß*) between his own transcendental idealism and Jacobi's faith-based realism,<sup>15</sup> and many commentators have noted the extent to which Fichte, in *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, emphasizes the parallels between his own thought and Jacobi's—going so far, for example, as to present an account of Wissen ("knowledge") in Book II that corresponds almost exactly to Jacobi's one-sided, purely theoretical interpretation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and employing the term *Glaube* ("belief") in Book III in a manner guaranteed to remind contemporary readers of Jacobi's apparently similar use of the term. Gueroult, however, goes farther and insists that Fichte, in his effort to respond to Jacobi's criticisms, ended up *abandoning* some of the central doctrines of his own previous philosophy, as he performed a public "about-face," which he vainly tried to disguise by means of various ineffective ruses or "alibis."<sup>16</sup>

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14. Gueroult, *L'évolution et la structure de la doctrine de la science*, vol. I, 377.

15. Fichte to Jacobi, August 30, 1795 (GA, III/2, 393). For a detailed discussion of Fichte's relationship to Jacobi and Jacobi's attitude toward and familiarity with the *Wissenschaftslehre*, see the following: (1) Ives Radrizzani's "Présentation" to his French translation of Jacobi's *Lettre sur le nihilisme* (Paris: Flammarion, 2009), 7–38; (2) Wolfgang Müller-Lauter, "Über die Standpunkt des Lebens und der Spekulation. Ein Beitrag zur Auseinandersetzung zwischen Fichte und Jacobi unter besonderer Berücksichtigung ihrer Briefe," in *Idealismus mit Folgen. Die Epochenwell um 1800 in Kunst und Geisteswissenschaften*, ed. Hans-Jürgen Gawoll and Chrisoph Jamme (München: Wilhelm Fink, 1994), 47–67; and (3) Hansjürgen Verweyen, "In der Falle zwischen Jacobi und Hegel: Fichtes *Bestimmung des Menschen* (1800)," *Freiburger Zeitschrift für Philosophie und Theologie* 48 (2001): 381–400.

16. According to Gueroult, Fichte deliberately tried to disguise how far the idealistic account of knowledge in Book II differed from his earlier account of the same. He did this, first of all, by claiming that his new account preserves the "objectivity" of experience by appealing to the necessity of thinking representations according to certain a priori laws (even though this "objectivity," as the conclusion of Book II makes clear, falls far short of what is demanded by practical reason). Secondly, he tried to disguise his about-face in Book II by maintaining that the distinctive task of the account of "knowledge" in Book II is not to provide us with an account of truth but simply to eliminate the errors contained in a dogmatic conception of reality. But in doing this, claims Gueroult, he simply ignored the fact that he had already,

This view of Jacobi's influence upon *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* has recently been endorsed by Hansjürgen Verweyen, who argues that what began as a purely "strategic effort" on Fichte's part to present his philosophy—and especially the previously undeveloped portion of the same devoted to the philosophy of religion—in a form that would stress the parallels between his own philosophy and Jacobi's "non-philosophy" eventually led him to present a one-sided version of his own idealism in Book II and to make an "inflationary use of the concept of belief" in Book III. In the end, inspired, perhaps, by a remark in Jacobi's "Open Letter" concerning the essential difference between that *unity with itself* for which the I strives and that which is

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in his scientific works of 1794 and 1795, provided his readers with a far richer account of "knowledge," one involving both the practical and theoretical activities of the I and not requiring any appeal to "belief" in order to establish the "reality" of the objects of experience.

The primary reason that Fichte made this about-face in Book II, according to Gueroult, was simply in order to be better able to "imitate" Jacobi's doctrine concerning the antinomy of speculation and reality. Whereas Fichte had recently (for example, in his "Second Introduction to the *Wissenschaftslehre*" of 1797) celebrated the *unity* of speculation and belief, he now *opposes* two different systems of speculation—dogmatic (in Bk. I) and idealistic/nihilistic (in Bk. II)—in order to pave the way for a *salto mortale* in Bk. III, in which speculation appears to be sacrificed altogether to belief.

Book III, in turn, according to Gueroult, sets the stage for a new set of "alibis" designed to obscure this radical change in Fichte's philosophy. First, Fichte could point to the fact that he had long insisted that the *Wissenschaftslehre* presupposes a pre-philosophical belief in the reality of one's own freedom. But this, says Gueroult, obscures the radically different meanings of the terms *belief* and *reality* in these earlier writings and in *BM*. In the earlier writings, belief in one's freedom is not a matter of passive *feeling* but of direct self-awareness of one's duty (what Fichte called the "real intellectual intuition"), whereas in *BM*, "feeling seems to have completely usurped the place of intuition," and willing has lost the close association with thinking that it previously had in Fichte's philosophy. Secondly, even though Fichte had previously conceded that we are unable to "feel" our own acting, this did not then lead him to maintain, as he does in *BM*, that one must appeal to "belief" in order to establish one's own reality—something that had previously been established by appealing to the I's intellectual intuition of itself. Even though Fichte had earlier maintained that one could always doubt one's own freedom, at least in principle, and therefore had to base one's claims concerning the reality of the same on a willful act of belief, this was merely (according to Gueroult) in recognition of that fact that one might have only a weak intuition of the same, whereas it is impossible to doubt the reality established by an original intellectual intuition of the I's own self-positing. In abandoning his earlier account of how the I, through its absolute self-positing, establishes for itself its own reality (a claim that allowed him to ground speculation on intuition), Fichte found himself in *BM* propounding a doctrine "totally different from the one he had professed until then (that is, throughout the entire period preceding the Atheism Controversy)," even if he continued to use some of the same formulas to express himself. See Gueroult, "La Destination de l'Homme," 85–94.

essential and true in itself,<sup>17</sup> this led to the positing of a metaphysical dualism between the unity of consciousness and that pure will that is the law of the supersensible world and is thus what is true in itself, namely, God.

In Book III, Fichte employs the same language to describe the infinite will as an immediate identity of act and product that he had previously used to describe the original *Tathandlung* or fact/act of the I. However, this primal self-constitutive act is no longer understood from the finite perspective of the human I, but rather from the divine perspective of the absolute will. By stressing the differences between the sensible and supersensible orders, without offering any further guidance for understanding their relation, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, according to Verweyen, embraces a “nearly Gnostic dualism” and raises the question of how to understand the relationship between the absolute, divine will and human freedom in a way that avoids the heteronomous determination of the latter by the former—a question to which, again, according to Verweyen, Fichte first arrived at an adequate answer only in the 1804 *Wissenschaftslehren*.<sup>18</sup>

On Gueroult’s interpretation as well, Book III defends a “transcendental realism” that stands in an uneasy and unresolved relationship to the subjective idealism of Book II,<sup>19</sup> mirroring the tensions between knowledge and belief and between the sensible and supersensible worlds. Indeed, it is precisely such tensions, according to Gueroult, that mark this as a “transitional work,” one that plainly sets the stage for what he calls the “second moment of the *Wissenschaftslehre*,” in which the subjective standpoint of the Jena system gives way to a new transsubjective or absolute standpoint.<sup>20</sup>

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17. The passage in question (GA, II/3, 242–43) refers to Fichte’s doctrine of duty, understood as the I’s striving for unity with itself. After conceding that he does not deny the importance of this doctrine nor the truth and sublimity of the principle on which Fichte’s *Sittenlehre* is based (i.e., the necessary unity of the I, understood as “what is highest in the concept,” since it is an absolute condition for the very possibility of any rational being [*Dasein*] at all), Jacobi then adds the following: “but this unity itself is not the *essence* [*Wesen*], is not the *true*,” and this is why the ethical law of unity can never appeal to the human heart and lift man above himself. For this something higher, something above and beyond the unity of the I, is required: namely, God, as revealed to man through the “dependency of love”—of which, says Jacobi, he will simply not allow transcendental philosophy to rob him.

18. Verweyen, 394.

19. According to Gueroult, the “idealism” of Book II, which in some ways simply recapitulates, albeit in an utterly nongenetic manner, the account of the roles of feeling, intuition, and understanding in perception provided in Fichte’s own *Grundriss des Eigenthümlichen der Wissenschaftslehre*, is nevertheless far closer in spirit to Berkeley’s idealism, even though Book II arrives at a skeptical conclusion that is the very opposite of Berkeley’s. This leads Gueroult to suggest that the real purpose of Book II is to expose the “fanastic” or “magical” idealism of Novalis (Gueroult, “La destination de l’homme,” 84).

20. “Avec le concept de *force étrangère* apporté par la *Bestimmung des Menschen*, la WL passé d’un point d’appui subjectif à un point d’appui transsubjectif, de l’idéalité à l’actualité de

The tension between knowing and not-knowing is closely connected with another one: namely, the tension between the “ideal ground” of our belief in reality (the feeling of duty) and the real ground of reality itself (the infinite will or absolute). Fichte’s new strategy for relieving this unresolved tension, claims Gueroult, was to incorporate them within the *Wissenschaftslehre* itself and to do this in such a way that the absolute functions as the *negation* of knowledge, which is precisely what one finds in the later versions of his system, beginning with that of 1801–02. Indeed, Gueroult interprets the latter as a “synthesis” of Jacobi’s “non-philosophy” with the earlier *Wissenschaftslehre* in an attempt to find a “new way to unite the intellect and the heart.”<sup>21</sup>

In addition to Gueroult and Verweyen, many other commentators—including Edmund Husserl,<sup>22</sup> Richard Kroner,<sup>23</sup> Max Wundt,<sup>24</sup> Walter

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l’Absolut, de la contradiction à l’accord du postulat . . . de l’idéalisme au réalisme (postulé par le pur moralisme). Cette transformation a sa cause dans la conflit entre la nécessité de la genèse du monde (de la nature et des individus) et l’impossibilité de cette genèse” (Gueroult, *L’évolution et la structure de la doctrine de la science*, vol. I, 379–80).

21. Gueroult, “La destination de l’homme,” 95.

22. Edmund Husserl, “Fichte’s Ideal of Humanity [Three Lectures],” trans. James G. Hart, *Husserl Studies* 12 (1995): 111–33. “In the collection of writings after 1800 . . . Fichte’s metaphysics, as well as his doctrine of religion and God, and inseparably his ideal of humanity, undergo a profound transformation. They are introduced through the spirited piece on *The Vocation of Man*. Already in this text the identification of God with the moral world-order vanishes; and thereby there falls away the identification of religion and morality. A similar advance which was realized in Greek philosophy from Plato to Neoplatonism is prepared in this writing and is completed in the later writings of Fichte, namely a progression to an inner religious mysticism” (122). According to Hart, in addition to repeating these three popular lectures (primarily before audiences of returning soldiers) on *Fichtes Menschenideale* three times in 1917 and 1918, Husserl also thrice taught a seminar on BM: in the summer semesters of 1903, 1915, and 1918 (“Husserl and Fichte: With Special Regard to Husserl’s Lecture, ‘Fichte’s Ideal of Humanity,’” *Husserl Studies* 12 [1995], 135). Hart also reports that Husserl was familiar only with Fichte’s popular writings and never really studied any version of the *Wissenschaftslehre* itself.

23. Richard Kroner, *Von Kant bis Hegel*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Mohr, 1961 [orig. 1921/1924]), vol. II, 67–76. According to Kroner, BM shows Fichte fully in the thrall of the new “aesthetic and religious *Zeitgeist*,” and thus represents the transition from ethical to speculative idealism. Indeed, he maintains that the standpoint of BM is closer to that of Schleiermacher than to that of the earlier *Wissenschaftslehre* (67). Kroner further claims that the entire book is characterized by an internal dialectic between ethical and speculative idealism, or, more precisely, between ethical and religious conviction, or between the standpoint of *acting* and the standpoint of *visionary insight* into the absolute, a dialectic eventually resolved in favor of the latter. Kroner also repeats the familiar Hegelian criticisms of the “dualism” of knowledge and belief and of sensible and supersensible worlds, which allegedly permeates BM. He even suggests (76) that the reason Fichte did not publish any of the later versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is because he was aware of the conflict between his new speculative/religious standpoint and that of “scientific” philosophy as he construed it.

24. Max Wundt, *Fichte-Forschungen* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann, 1976 [orig. 1929]). Wundt also sees BM as a representing a critical turning point in the develop-

Schulz,<sup>25</sup> Luigi Pareyson,<sup>26</sup> and Peter Preuss<sup>27</sup>—have interpreted *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* in this manner: that is, as representing a crucial transitional or turning point in the development of Fichte's philosophy and, more specifically, as deeply incompatible with the spirit of the earlier, Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*. But there have also been a few critics of this view as well, beginning perhaps with Henri Bergson, who, though he begins his 1889 seminar on *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* with the stark declaration that it is man who constitutes the center of Fichte's early philosophy, whereas it is God who is the center of his later thought, nevertheless includes *Die*

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ment of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Unlike Gueroult, however, Wundt was familiar with the at that time still unpublished Halle transcript of Fichte's lectures on *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, with its new doctrine of the intelligible pure will as the ultimate ground of all reality. However, Wundt maintains that in 1797 Fichte was still insisting on the *inner unity* of the sensible and intelligible worlds, which are only two perspectives on the same thing, inasmuch as the body is only a sensible presentation of the will and the will is simply what is intelligible about the body. This, however, he finds to be no longer the case in 1800, where Fichte seems to embrace (as Hegel had claimed) a genuine dualism of God and world, thus reinstating the Kantian dualism of theoretical and practical reason. The ethical demand is still the basis for all claims concerning reality, but now it demands a kind of reality beyond and superior to that of the sensible world, in which duty can never be adequately realized: namely the supersensible reality of the infinite divine will, which is both the ground of all sensible reality and the law of the supersensible world but is *not identical with* either of these worlds. Here, in Book III, according to Wundt, "for the first time, the reality of the divine as the absolute ground of all actuality comes decisively forth" (153).

25. Walter Schulz, *Johann Gottlieb Fichte. Vernunft und Freiheit* (Pfullingen: Neske, 1962). Schulz claims that BM occupies a "key position" in Fichte's writings and represents a real divide or *Einschnitt* in the development of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, inasmuch as Fichte's pre-1800 system posits the origin of knowing within the absolute I and all the later versions posit this origin in something else, something that limits and determines the absolute I, something that is referred to in BM as "the moral world order" or "the divine" (16). But Schulz, unlike most of the other commentators who see 1800 as a turning point in Fichte's development as a philosopher, does not interpret the "infinite will" or the "supersensible world" as existing in themselves over against and apart from the finite I. Instead, he interprets the absolute in this case as identical to the *community* of finite I's. "*Dieses Wir aber ist die moralische vernünftige Ordnung des Göttlichen, die Ich und Du vereint*" (21). And yet, according to Schulz, what makes this plurality of subjects into a moral community is nevertheless something *distinct* from any of them, something "*übergreifende*" and this "*Uebergreifende ist die eigentliche Realität*." It is the discovery of this new concept of "reality" that, according to Schulz, qualifies BM as a truly *metaphysical* inquiry into the question, "What is really real?" All the subsequent versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre* are, Schulz maintains, dedicated to answering this new question and to resolving the new "dialectic of action and reality" first articulated in BM.

26. "La missione dell'uomo, che, oltre ad essere un autentico capolavoro letterario, é anche un preciso documento filosofico, che segna il passaggio del sistema della libertà da una filosofia dell'io, di esito necessariamente pratico, a una filosofia, dell'assoluto, di carattere decisamente religioso" (Luigi Pareyson, *Fichte. Il sistema della libertà*, 2nd ed. [Milano: Mursia, 1976], 406). Even though Pareyson maintains that BM documents Fichte's transition from a practically oriented philosophy of the I to a religiously oriented philosophy of the absolute, he does not,

*Bestimmung des Menschen* in the former. Despite the new tone of this work and despite its religious and even mystical character, this should not be taken to indicate any sort of break with his earlier system. On the contrary, insists Bergson, the doctrines presented in *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* are exactly the same as those encountered in Fichte's earlier writings, albeit presented "under a different aspect."<sup>28</sup> More recently, Alexis Philonenko and Ives Radrizzani<sup>29</sup> have dissented vigorously from Gueroult's interpretation and have argued forcefully for the essential *continuity* between Fichte's earlier writings and *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*.<sup>30</sup>

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as Radrizzani points out, consider Fichte's later system wholly different from his earlier, Jena system, but instead treats the later system as one in which the finite I is no longer "absolutized," but is viewed instead as the "consciousness of the absolute" (Radrizzani, "The Place of the Vocation of Man in Fichte's Work," in *New Essays on Fichte's Later Jena Wissenschaftslehre*, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore [Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002], 344).

27. In his "Translator's Introduction" to his English edition of *The Vocation of Man*, Preuss quite implausibly represents this work not as the turning point from one stage of Fichte's philosophy to another, but as a plea for *abandoning philosophy altogether* and argues that the lesson of this work is that "Fichte's philosophy [as here] ends in total cognitive skepticism, i.e., in the abandonment of philosophy proper, and looks for wisdom instead to a kind of quasi-religious faith" (VM, xii).

28. "La doctrine analysée est celle des *Einleitung des Grundlage* . . . avec lesquels nous avons pu commenter les différents passages. Mais il est aisé de voir que le principe divin dont il est question dans les derniers développements est le principe que sert de point de départ à la *Wissenschaftslehre*, mais envisagé sous un autre aspect. . . . Ce que Fichte a appelé ici le moi idée dans le 2<sup>e</sup> Introduction, c'est ce qu'il appelle Dieu dans la *Bestimmung*" (Henri Bergson, "Fichte. *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*. Cours d'Henri Bergson—ENS 1898," ed. Philippe Soulez, in *Cahiers du séminaire de philosophie* [Strasbourg] 7 (1988): 201).

29. Ives Radrizzani, "The Place of the *Vocation of Man* in Fichte's Work." This same article is also available in German and French versions: "*Die Bestimmung des Menschen: der Wendepunkt zur Spätphilosophie?*" *Fichte-Studien* 17 (2000): 19–42; and "*La place de la Destination de l'homme dans l'oeuvre Fichtean*," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie* 4 (1998): 665–96.

30. Philonenko vehemently denies that *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* represents any sort of "turn" in Fichte's development and insists that it is simply "a view of the problem of eternity in its reciprocal relationship to time and simultaneously develops in a popular form the principles acquired from the *Wissenschaftslehre* in its totality" (Alexis Philonenko, *L'oeuvre de Fichte* [Paris: Vrin, 1984], 116). Though Philonenko claims that the account of knowledge in Book II is consistent with what is outlined in the writings of 1794 and 1795, he also admits that some of the ideas expressed there are not treated scientifically by Fichte until the 1801–02 *Wissenschaftslehre*. He also denies that Fichte's view of belief in Book III is the same as Jacobi's, inasmuch as speculation (in Book II) is supposed to lead the reader directly to the standpoint of belief (in Book III), which thus requires no *salto mortale*.

Fichte and Jacobi are nevertheless, according to Philonenko, in agreement concerning the inadequacy of Kant's "purely theoretical" refutation of idealism in the first *Critique*; but whereas Jacobi relies simply upon a leap of faith to remedy this deficiency, Fichte appeals to *practical reason*, which is something very different (104). Nor, according to Philonenko, is Fichte's God the same as Jacobi's, inasmuch as the God of Book III is always purely



Radrizzani in particular has attempted a detailed, point by point rebuttal of Gueroult's interpretation, a rebuttal based largely upon a text unknown to Gueroult and to scholars of his generation: namely, the student transcripts of Fichte's lectures on "The Foundations of Transcendental Philosophy (*Wissenschaftslehre*) *nova methodo*." His thesis is that "the *Vocation of Man* belongs entirely to the philosophy of the Jena period and . . . reveals no significant systematic changes."<sup>31</sup> Thus, he denies that the admittedly one-sided and subjective account of transcendental idealism in Book II was ever intended to be an adequate or complete exposition of the idealism of the *Wissenschaftslehre*; instead, much like Part Two of the *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* and like the *Grundriss des Eigenthümlichen der Wissenschaftslehre*, it deals only with the contribution of the I's *theoretical* power to the constitution of experience, and, like those earlier partial accounts, it establishes only the *possibility*, not the *actuality* of real knowledge. For the latter, one must consider the essential contribution of its *practical* power to the constitution of objective experience, which is precisely the task of Book III.

As Radizanni points out, at the very time he was writing *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* Fichte was also engaged in revising for publication his lectures on *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, where the practical activity of the I is seamlessly integrated from the very start with its theoretical activity—a fact that suggests the absurdity of treating Book II as if it were meant to be a complete and critical account of the standpoint of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, an account allegedly designed to demonstrate, by its very inadequacy, the need to go beyond knowledge and philosophy altogether

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immanent within consciousness and is neither a substance nor a part of any substantial order (106). The supersensible world described in Book III is, in turn, nothing more nor less than a synthesis of the finite wills of concrete individuals—a "great mystery," Philonenko concedes, that is not solved in BM, where it remains, as Fichte admits, "incomprehensible and unthinkable" (108).

31. Radrizzani, "The Place of the *Vocation of Man* in Fichte's Work," 336. Radrizzani does not deny that *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* gives new and fuller expression to Fichte's philosophy of religion nor that it does so in a language calculated to recall that of Jacobi and expressed "with a prophetic-pedagogic accent, which is linked to the popular character of the writing." But he nevertheless insists that the *foundation* for the same is clearly laid in §13 of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, and thus maintains that "no 'conversion' to Jacobi, no romantic mysticism, no recourse to a 'transsubjective basis,' no turning from idealism to realism can be found in the *Vocation of Man*; we discover there instead a living and graphic presentation of the main results of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, as they are exposed particularly in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*" (337).

and appeal to “belief” in the manner of Jacobi. Yet even Radrizanni does not deny that *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, with its one-sided account of “idealism” in Book II and its adoption of the language of “belief” rather than that of “knowledge” in Book III, certainly gives the *appearance* of defending a position at odds with that presented in all of the writings published by Fichte over the preceding six years. This however, claims Radrizanni, is simply a reflection of Fichte’s specific *strategic* intentions in this work, in which he reveals himself to be “a master in the art of simulation.”

According to Radrizanni, the reason *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* has been so widely misunderstood is precisely because it is an “encoded” text, and moreover, one written in a “destructive code.”<sup>32</sup> Fichte’s primary intention in composing this popular work was to present the elements of his philosophy in a form calculated to flatter and to entice readers impressed by Jacobi’s critique of the *Wissenschaftslehre*—if not convert Jacobi himself (whom Fichte never ceased trying to win over to his philosophy). Hence the sketch of “idealism” in Book II describes it just as Jacobi had described the *Wissenschaftslehre* in his “Open Letter.” But the conclusion of Book II does not represent, as Gueroult along with many other interpreters have assumed, an “about-face” on Fichte’s part, in which he renounces his own philosophy and endorses Jacobi’s description of the same as “nihilism,” but is simply a dramatic way of calling attention to the need to *supplement* theoretical with practical reason. And this is just what occurs in Book III, which, despite the unmistakable adoption of some of Jacobi’s distinctive language, really contains nothing new at all, at least according to Radrizanni. That all claims concerning reality must be based upon *Glaube* and *Gefühl* (“feeling”) is a doctrine already plainly stated in the 1794 *Grundlage*, for example,<sup>33</sup> and not a new claim that Fichte subsequently picked up from Jacobi. Similarly, the controversial account of the supersensible world and the central role of the “infinite will” in Book III, though these doctrines may well have shocked readers for more than a century, will come as no surprise to readers intimately acquainted with the contents of Fichte’s revised presentation of his Jena system in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, where the “pure will” serves as the central element of the “five-fold

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32. Ibid., 320.

33. “As we have now demonstrated, reality is possible for the I, as well as for the Not-I only by means of a relation to feeling. . . . *With respect to reality as such*—that of the I and of the Not-I—there is only a *feeling*” (*Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, GA, I/2, 429; SW, 301).

synthesis” that unites the intelligible and sensible realms and connects the finite individual with each. And even the claim that the sensible world is ultimately “grounded on” the supersensible one as its “firm substrate” is already encountered in § 14 of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*.<sup>34</sup> (A similar function of the pure will is at least hinted at in the *System der Sittenlehre*, though it is less prominent there than in the *nova methodo*.)

Whereas Jacobi insisted on opposing the standpoints of “life” and “speculation” (in Fichte’s language, the “practical” and “theoretical” standpoints), and whereas Fichte himself insisted upon the importance of not confusing the two,<sup>35</sup> the strategy of *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* is to show that reflection upon the possibility of any *real* knowledge (that is, of actual experience) requires recognition of the essential contribution to the same made by practical reason. Like a wolf in sheep’s clothing, his crafty strategy, according to Radrizzani, was “to play Jacobi’s game, to adopt his viewpoint and his reproaches in order to put the reply of the *Wissenschaftslehre* [to Jacobi’s critique of philosophy, as incorporated into Book II] in a better light,”<sup>36</sup> so that he could then proceed, in Book III, to present, albeit in new, more “popular” language, his true position regarding the relationship between practice and theory, life and speculation.

As for what Verweyen has called Fichte’s “inflationary use of the concept of belief” in Book III, Radrizzani contends that the “elevation to *Glaube*” is simply a means for the discovery of the same supreme condition for the possibility of consciousness that had already been deduced, albeit much more rigorously, in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*: namely, the pure or infinite will, understood as the “immediately known” principle that alone “allows us to go beyond representation.”<sup>37</sup> (Though of course it is only “immediately known” in the sense that is implicit in one’s immediate knowledge of duty). But why is this same absolute principle now described as an object of “belief”? Here again, maintains Radrizzani, Fichte is only being true to the lesson of the *nova methodo*, inasmuch as the latter is based not upon any self-evident first principle, but upon a “postulate,”

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34. “This new presentation also provides us with the *intelligible* world as the firm substrate for the *empirical* one” (GA, IV/2, 250; FTP, 314).

35. On this topic, see especially the 1801 *Sonnenklarer Bericht über das Wesen der neuesten Philosophie*. For further discussion see Breazeale, “‘The Standpoint of Life’ and ‘The Standpoint of Philosophy’ in the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*,” in *Transzendentalphilosophie als System*, ed. Mues, 81–104; and Müller-Lauter, “Über die Standpunkt des Lebens und der Spekulation.”

36. Radrizzani, “The Place of the Vocation of Man in Fichte’s Work,” 326.

37. *Ibid.*, 329.

which possesses no value for anyone who fails to carry out the postulated act of thinking.<sup>38</sup>

As for the actual *contents* of Book III, Radrizzani professes to discover nothing there that is not already found in the second half of the *nova methodo*, albeit now presented according to a “simplified procedure,” which consists of deducing the conditions for *applying* one’s belief in freedom (the first “postulate of practical reason”), thereby making it explicit that these conditions include not only belief in the reality of the sensible and supersensible worlds, but also in one’s own immortality and in an infinite, divine will as the law of the supersensible world, in the sense of an *ordo ordanans*. Thus, according to Radrizzani’s interpretation, all of these additional claims (or beliefs) are actually included in one’s original belief in (or postulate of) one’s own freedom and independence and thus should not really be considered to be separate postulates at all.<sup>39</sup>

The “practical ontology” of Book III should therefore be viewed merely as a new presentation in a popular form, one undoubtedly influ-

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38. “It is precisely by making the will an object of faith that Fichte was true to the lesson of the *nova methodo*, because one must not forget the whole methodology of the *nova methodo* is based on a ‘postulate’ and is not supposed to have any value for anyone who does not carry out this postulate” (ibid., 330). Radrizzani then proceeds to cite Fichte’s acknowledgment (in his discussion of the “choice” between idealism and dogmatism in the “Second Introduction” of 1797) that one must have “faith in one’s own self-sufficiency and freedom” to support his own (Radrizzani’s) conclusion that “the idea that knowledge is ultimately based on faith implies in itself nothing religious, otherwise the whole *nova methodo* and every philosophical writing can be said to be ‘religious.’”

(I confess that I find Radrizzani’s parallel between the role of “belief” in VM and of “postulation” in *WLn* to be rather unconvincing, inasmuch as there would appear to be a very large difference between saying that the construction of a system of philosophy must begin, in the manner of a Euclidian demonstration, with a particular *act of construction* [a “postulate”] and saying that through an act of will we resolve to “believe” in our own real efficacy as free beings.)

39. Just as the postulate of immortality is, according to Radrizzani, already implicitly contained in the original postulate of freedom (333), so is the postulate of the infinite will, i.e., the postulate of God’s existence, contained in it as well: “The resurgence of the problem of the substrate allows us to establish easily the parallel with the *nova methodo*. The God of the third book of the *Vocation of Man* occupies exactly the place devoted to the pure will in the *nova methodo* and coincides with it. As such, God assumes the link among all the individual I’s, so far as each individual I is founded on the pure will. Thus the third postulate is already included in the first” (ibid., 335). Radrizzani also correctly observes that Fichte had previously affirmed in his 1798 *System der Sittenlehre* the close connection between belief in the necessity of moral progress and belief in immortality and God (333; see SS, GA, I/5, 305; SW, IV, 350, SS, 331).

enced by the Atheism Controversy and Jacobi's "Open Letter," of what was previously encountered (i.e., deduced) along the "descending path" that constitutes the second or synthetic half of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*. Understood in this way, Book III implies no move beyond the perspective of the finite I nor does it appeal to some higher, transcendent or "transsubjective" ground of reality.<sup>40</sup> As for the controversial place of God or the infinite will in Book III, it, like the supersensible world itself, should be viewed as no more than an "'explanatory ground,' that is, in a strictly epistemological sense that exclude[s] any ontological connotation"—as an "idea of practical reason."<sup>41</sup>

So where does this leave us? What conclusions should one draw from this survey of the secondary literature about the place of Fichte's *Bestimmung des Menschen* in the overall development of his philosophy and concerning its relationship to the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*? Radrizzani is surely correct in maintaining that there is far more continuity between the earlier system, particularly as articulated in the *nova methodo*, and *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* than is often realized. An yet it is also difficult to fault Gueroult and others for seeing in the latter if not something radically new, then at least something that seems to fit very uncomfortably within the framework of the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*, something that seems to point beyond the latter, to a rather different conception of philosophy as a whole and to a new understanding of the relation of the I to a reality beyond its own limits. So what's a scholar to do?

One strategy, adopted by Paul Frank, is simply to ignore this work as an "unrepresentative" one, "not addressed to professional philosophers."<sup>42</sup>

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40. See Radrizzani, "The Place of the *Vocation of Man* in Fichte's Work," 330–31. Radrizzani tries to support this controversial interpretation by referring to Fichte's notorious remark that "only through its relation to me does anything exist for me. But everywhere only one relation to me is possible, and all others are only subspecies of this one: my vocation to act ethically. My world is the object and sphere of my duties and absolutely nothing else" (GA, I/6, 263; SW, II, 262; VM, 77). This, however, does not *resolve* the tension between such admissions of human finitude and the claims in Book III concerning the infinite will as the substrate and determining ground of consciousness. Radrizzani's strategy for responding to this challenge is to claim that Fichte's reference to God or the "infinite will" in Book III pertains only to the "argument of belief and not of knowledge," and hence that the practical ontology presented there "remains perfectly transcendental, and thus God can only be said to be the transsubjective basis of the human community as a transcendental idea of practical reason" (336). Such a postulate directly follows, in other words, from an analysis of the original postulate of freedom itself and makes no transcendent claims. For a criticism of this interpretation, see my chapter in this volume.

41. Radrizzani, "The Place of the *Vocation of Man* in Fichte's Work," 336.

This would certainly solve a problem previously noted by Richard Kroner, namely, that this work may be difficult to interpret precisely *because* it is not addressed to professional philosophers,<sup>43</sup> but this seems very problematic. It is problematic, first of all, because, as is clear from Fichte's own writings and correspondence, he did indeed claim both that *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* is consistent with his earlier writings *and* that it also advances the standpoint of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, either by expanding its first principles or by extending its scope to include a branch of philosophy originally envisioned as an integral part of the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*, though never actually articulated as such during the Jena period: the philosophy of religion. Secondly, for all the difficulties it presents—and on this point I agree with Radrizzani, that, of all Fichte's writings, none are more difficult to interpret than this one<sup>44</sup>—one cannot simply ignore or dismiss *The Vocation of Man*, not only because it provides a superb lens for surveying the vexing and vexed question of the “unity of Fichte's philosophy” and the relationship of the post-Jena versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre* to the earlier presentations of the same, but also because the interpretation of Book III in particular has powerful implications for the interpretation of the entire Jena system, particularly the *nova methodo* and *Sittenlehre*.

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42. Paul W. Franks, *All or Nothing. Systematicity, Transcendental Arguments, and Skepticism in German Idealism* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005), 314n.

43. “Die *Bestimmung des Menschen* ist nicht für ‘Philosophen von Profession’ geschrieben, sie will vielmehr ‘verständlich für alle Leser, die überhaupt ein Buch zu verstehen vermögen’ (II, 167). Vielleicht ist es gerade deshalb ‘für Philosophen von Profession’ sehr schwer, dies Buch zu Verstehen, es so zu Verstehen, daß sich wissenschaftlich etwas darüber sagen läßt. Man fühlt, daß Fichtes Gedanken in einen gärenden Strudel hineingeraten sind, aus dem heraus er sie auf das feste Land—nicht der wissenschaftliche Gestaltung, sondern—des lebenden Glaube zu führen sucht” (Kroner, 68–69).

44. “The *Vocation of Man* is without doubt one of the most difficult texts to interpret in the whole of Fichte's work” (Radrizzani, “The Place of the *Vocation of Man* in Fichte's Work,” 318).



# “An Other and Better World”

## Fichte’s *The Vocation of Man* as a Theologico-Political Treatise

GÜNTER ZÖLLER

*Habent sua fata libelli\**

Like Plato before him and Heidegger after him, Fichte was a prolific author but not really a writer of books. In the comprehensive edition of his collected works undertaken by the Bavarian Academy of Sciences, which comprises some thirty-five volumes, the works published by Fichte himself only amount to ten tomes. Moreover, most of those works originated in academic lectures at the universities of Jena, Erlangen, and Berlin and were subsequently, or in one case simultaneously, published by Fichte, chiefly in an attempt to expand their audience to a more general learned readership. Among Fichte’s early works only the political writings on the French Revolution (*Contribution to the Rectification of the Public’s Judgments About the French Revolution, Revindication of the Freedom of Thought From the Princes of Europe*) and the pseudo-Kantian essay in the philosophy of revealed religion

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\*The Latin quotation that precedes the first section of this chapter is taken from the fragmentarily preserved didactic poem entitled *De litteris* (On Literature), by the ancient grammarian Terentianus Maurus. The complete line (v. 1286) reads: *Pro captu lectoris habent sua fata libelli* (Booklets have their fate depending on the mental capacity of the reader).



(*Attempt At a Critique Of All Revelation*) did not originate in prior public or private lectures. In fact, all three of those publications predate Fichte's first academic appointment, just as Fichte's later genuine book publications—*The Vocation of Man* (1800), *Crystal-Clear Report* (1800), *The Closed Commercial State* (1801), and *Friedrich Nicolai's Life and Literary Opinions* (1801)—all date from a period of time in which Fichte was without an academic appointment and even without a substitute extra-academic audience. Moreover, after the fiasco of the so-called atheism dispute and the ensuing loss of his professorship at Jena, Fichte even desisted from lending book form to many of his later academic lectures, including all of those on the *Wissenschaftslehre*, effectively limiting his remaining published work to popular, lecture-based treatments of the philosophy of history, political philosophy, and philosophy of education, as well as condensed presentations of the philosophy of law and ethics.

The motivation behind Fichte's lifelong reticence regarding the writing of books and his equally lifelong preferred practice of turning his lectures into books—and thereby making his books into lectures—is his deep conviction of the eminently pneumatic nature of philosophy. For Fichte, philosophy proper does not have a subject matter (*Stoff*) that lends itself to doctrinal fixation and transmission. Rather, philosophy is an individual intellectual activity that is to mirror the active, spontaneous, and free character of its sole subject matter, viz., the human mind (*Geist*), the I (*Ich*), or knowledge (*Wissen*), viewed not as an entity, a faculty, or a body of cognitions but as the normative sum total of principled reason (*Vernunft*). Accordingly, communication of philosophical matters is targeted at conveying the elusive “spirit” (*Geist*) of philosophy and resorts to the “letter” (*Buchstabe*) only for practical purposes and with the ultimate intention of leaving behind the medium as well as its artificial product, namely, literature.<sup>1</sup>

Fichte's *horror libri* is, to a large extent, responsible for the failed, fragmentary, and faulty reception as well as effective history (*Wirkungsgeschichte*) of his philosophy in general and that of its speculative core, the *Wissenschaftslehre*, in particular. After an initial phase of tremendous philosophical and cultural influence on his contemporaries, Fichte—traumatized

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1. On the pneumatic nature of Fichte's philosophy, see Günter Zöller, “Die Sittlichkeit des Geistes und der Geist der Sittlichkeit. Fichtes systematischer Beitrag,” in *Geist und Sittlichkeit. Ethik-Modelle von Platon bis Levinas*, ed. Edith Düsing, Klaus Düsing, and Hans-Dieter Klein (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 2009), 217–38.

and rendered oversensitive by the tendentious and hostile readings of his philosophy in the so-called atheism dispute—virtually withdrew from participating in the ongoing public debate about the development of post-Kantian philosophy, effectively leaving the terrain to his junior rivals, Schelling and Hegel. It was only the posthumous publication of some of his later Berlin lectures in the mid-nineteenth century and the complete edition of his later lectures in Jena, Berlin, Erlangen, and Königsberg in the last third of the twentieth century that returned Fichte to his rightful place as an early equal to the efforts and accomplishments of Schelling and Hegel and as the remaining rival to their mature late works.<sup>2</sup>

In the context of Fichte's self-chosen exile from the reading public and from the ongoing philosophical debates of his time, the long-standing and continuing popular success of his book *The Vocation of Man* (*Die Bestimmung des Menschen*), published in two authorized editions—and one unauthorized one—in 1800 and 1801, is almost an embarrassment.<sup>3</sup> For one, the work had a crass commercial purpose and was written in order to secure some revenue to its author, who recently had lost his professorial salary. Moreover, the work is of an overtly occasional nature, responding to the recent public portrayal of Fichte as an antireligious atheist with a decidedly religious and even pious self-portrayal of Fichte's philosophical position. Most importantly, the work is a direct and detailed response to the challenge posed to Fichte's philosophy by F. H. Jacobi, an influential and highly regarded philosophical and literary author at the time, who just had exposed the alleged "nihilism" underlying Fichte's post-Kantian radical idealism.<sup>4</sup>

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2. On Fichte's equal place in classical German philosophy, see Günter Zöller, "Die Möglichkeiten und Grenzen der Vernunft. Kant und der deutsche Idealismus," in *Die Fragen der Philosophie. Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Disziplinen und Epochen der Philosophie*, ed. Wilhelm Vossenkuhl and Eugen Fischer (Munich: Beck, 2003), 295–312; and "German Realism. The Self-Limitation of Idealist Thinking in Fichte, Schelling and Schopenhauer," in *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism*, ed. Karl Ameriks (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 200–18.

3. For the details of the origination, publication and reception of *The Vocation of Man*, see GA I/6, 146–82; and Hansjürgen Verwey, "Einleitung," in Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* (Hamburg: Meiner, 2000), IX–XXXVII.

4. On the nature and function of Jacobi's open letter to Fichte, see Ives Radrizzani, "Présentation," in Jacobi, *Lettre sur le nihilisme et autres textes*, trans. and ed. Ives Radrizzani (Paris: Garnier-Flammarion, 2009), 7–38.

To be sure, the immediate reception of the work was nothing short of a disaster, and the long-range consequences of the work's one-sided reception proved equally deleterious to Fichte's philosophical reputation. Fichte immediately found himself critiqued and ridiculed for religiously overreacting to the attacks on his person and position by the joint forces of church and state and came to be regarded as a transcendental philosopher turned pious populist. In the long run, *The Vocation of Man* contributed more than any other of his publications to the widespread, lasting, and even ongoing perception of Fichte, especially of the later Fichte, as metaphysically oriented, religiously minded, and mystically inclined. In fact, *The Vocation of Man* came to be regarded as the watershed in Fichte's literary production, marking the transition, if not the change, from a youthful political and philosophical revolutionary to a matured metaphysician of divine love and order.<sup>5</sup>

In addition to serving as the legendary link between Fichte the philosopher of the I and Fichte the philosopher of the absolute, *The Vocation of Man* was put into service as an essential part of Fichte's popular works, or those of his writings intended not primarily for an academic audience or readership—like the multiple successive presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre*—but for a larger educated public.<sup>6</sup> Yet while not originally intended for academic instruction, *The Vocation of Man*, with its popular presentation of highly speculative matters, has served for a long time and often still serves as the main text representing its author's philosophical legacy in academic courses on German idealism or nineteenth-century philosophy.

To be sure, recent research has returned *The Vocation of Man* to its proper place in Fichte's philosophical production. In particular, the work's continuity with Fichte's later Jena lectures and writings has been asserted and established. A significant factor in this reassessment of Fichte's work from 1800 was the discovery and publication of transcripts detailing Fichte's "New Presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre*," or *Wissenschaftslehre*

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5. For the once-standard view of *The Vocation of Man* marking the beginning of Fichte's later period, see Martial Gueroult, "La Destination de l'homme," in *Etudes sur Fichte* (Hildesheim and New York: Olms, 1974), 72–95.

6. See *Popular Works of Johann Gottlieb Fichte*, trans. William Smith, 2 vols., 4th ed. (London: Trübner, 1889); reprint with prefaces from the 1st ed., intro. Daniel Breazeale (Bristol: Thoemmes, 1999) 1:319–478; Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, trans. William Smith, intro. E. Ritchie (Lasalle, IL: Open Court, 1965); Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, ed. and intro. Roderick M. Chisholm (New York: Macmillan, 1985); Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, trans. and intro. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett, 1987). In what follows, Fichte's work will be cited after the English translation by Peter Preuss.

*nova methodo*, from the winter semesters 1796–97, 1797–98, and 1798–99, of which previously only two introductions and a first chapter published by Fichte himself in 1797–98 had been known. In light of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, with its original focus on the intertwined conceptions of the will and intersubjectivity, the treatment of the divine will and the spiritual realm in *The Vocation of Man* appear not as a novel development foreshadowing or even inaugurating the later Fichte but as a popular rendition of a developmental stage of Fichte's thinking that can be dated back to the second half of his Jena period, which hence must be considered as extending all the way from 1796 through 1800 or even 1801.<sup>7</sup> While this recent and widely recognized reassessment of the place of *The Vocation of Man* leaves open the possibility of a later change or development in Fichte's philosophy, the work from 1800 can no longer be drawn on to date and characterize such a change, which would have to postdate it.

Further advances in understanding the place, the function, and the significance of *The Vocation of Man* were achieved as a result of increased familiarity with the formative role of F. H. Jacobi in Fichte's overall philosophical development, from the first emergence of the *Wissenschaftslehre* through the so-called atheism dispute to his later and last works. To judge from Fichte's correspondence and literary remains (*Nachlaß*), Jacobi was not so much an occasional opponent and confrontational critic for Fichte as a respected senior colleague whose radical opposition to Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy constituted a formidable challenge to Fichte's philosophical project. In particular, Jacobi's eloquent insistence on the extraphilosophical ground and goal of philosophy in life (*Leben*) and on the basis and warrant of knowledge (*Wissen*) in faith (*Glauben*) influenced Fichte's philosophical thought and development, to the point of making it seem like the seeking of a synthesis of Kantian rigor and sobriety with Jacobean pathos and enthusiasm.<sup>8</sup>

7. On the long "new presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre*," see Günter Zöller, "Das 'erste System der Freiheit' in Fichtes neuer Darstellung der *Wissenschaftslehre*," forthcoming in *System und Kritik um 1800*, ed. Christian Danz and Jürgen Stolzenberg (Hamburg: Meiner).

8. On Jacobi's critique of Fichte, see Günter Zöller, "Tod und Verklärung. Jacobi und Jean Paul über den Spinozismus von Fichtes *Wissenschaftslehre*," in *Ein Wendepunkt der geistigen Bildung der Zeit. Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi und die klassische deutsche Philosophie*, ed. Walter Jaeschke and Birgit Sandkaulen (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2004), 37–52. On Fichte's conceptions of faith and life in relation to Fichte, see Günter Zöller, "'Das Element aller Gewissheit.' Jacobi, Kant, und Fichte über den Glauben," *Fichte-Studien* 14 (1998): 21–41; and "Leben und Wissen. Der Stand der *Wissenschaftslehre* beim letzten Fichte," in *Der transzendentalphilosophische Zugang zur Wirklichkeit. Beiträge aus der aktuellen Fichte-Forschung*, ed. Erich Fuchs, Marco Ivaldo, and Giovanni Moretto (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 2001), 307–30.

In light of Fichte's lifelong philosophical engagement with Jacobi's metacritique of the critical philosophy, *The Vocation of Man* presents itself as tragic-comical masquerade in which a crypto-Jacobi attacks a pseudo-Fichte reduced to a caricature of its original and Fichte defends himself by assuming the persona of a super-Jacobi attempting the artificial blending of fideism and Fichteanism.<sup>9</sup> Under the deceptive surface of a popular piece, *The Vocation of Man* leads a complex double life of intertextuality and interreferentiality. The parody and irony involved in this literary-philosophical tour de force were destined to escape the naive reader who becomes entrapped and intrigued by the work's apparent pious pretensions.

### The Vocational Tradition

Despite the significant advances made in disentangling the highly involved web of referral and deferral that is *The Vocation of Man*, another layer of meaning and message underlying this enigmatic work so far has remained largely unassessed and underappreciated. *The Vocation of Man* forms part of a literary-philosophical tradition in the German Enlightenment posing and answering the question of the calling or destination of the human being, a question that arose in a situation of increasing disorientation about the place and the prospect of the human being in a world marked by rapid scientific discoveries and immense cultural and social changes.

The very title of his work from 1800—*Die Bestimmung des Menschen*—is not original with Fichte but goes back to part of the title of a book published more than a half-century earlier, in 1748, by the Lutheran clergyman Johann Joachim Spalding (1714–1804), who had served in high church offices in Berlin starting in 1764 and had been among the founding members of the inner circle of the Berlin Enlightenment, the Wednesday Society (*Mittwochsgesellschaft*), in 1783. Over the course of the second half of the eighteenth century Spalding revised and expanded his booklet, entitled “Considerations on the Vocation of the Human Being” (*Betrachtungen über die Bestimmung des Menschen*), which originally had comprised only twenty-six pages and subsequently grew substantially with each new edition until the thirteenth edition of 1794, which included 274 pages, of which

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9. On Fichte's Jacobean mimicry, see Günter Zöller, *Fichte's Transcendental Philosophy. The Original Duplicity of Intelligence and Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 111–26. On the controversy between Fichte and Jacobi, see Ives Radrizzani, “La confrontation entre Jacobi et Fichte à la lumière des Denkbücher,” *Archives de Philosophie* 62 (1999): 473–93.

165 pages constituted the main text and the remainder included various additions. There were also two contemporary translations of the work into Dutch, one into Latin, and another one into Italian.<sup>10</sup>

In character, Spalding's book is a work of moral edification that describes in a personal narrative style the course of thinking of someone who has decided to recommence the investigation of what he (or she) is meant to be. The successive candidates for the goal, end, or purpose indicated in the title of the work—the German word *Bestimmung*, with its root of *Stimme* (voice), had been coined earlier in analogy to the Latin *vocatio*—each taken up in a separate section of the book, are sensuality (*Sinnlichkeit*), intellectual delights (*Vergnügen des Geistes*), virtue (*Tugend*), religion (*Religion*), and immortality (*Unsterblichkeit*).<sup>11</sup> While the first two stages of the gradual vocational self-reflection are to be left behind once and for all, the meditator of Spalding's book retains the insights and attitudes of the subsequent mundane stages (law and morality, religion) even when making the final transition that is to go beyond the world (immortality).

Two further features stand out in Spalding's proto-*Vocation*. Rather than employing the neutral, general phrase "the vocation of the human being," which appears only in the title of the work, he employs personalized locutions such as "my vocation" (*meine Bestimmung*) and paraphrases the sought-after vocation as the "purpose" (*Zweck*) or "main purpose" (*Hauptzweck*) of "my life" or "my being," thereby indicating that one's vocation is to be determined as well as well as pursued individually, by each and every one for himself (or herself). More importantly, Spalding's meditator contrasts the difficulties encountered in coming to know the world outside us with the relative ease in ascertaining one's own purpose or vocation, including the certainty about one's final destination for immortality.

When Fichte published *The Vocation of Man* in Berlin in 1800,<sup>12</sup> Spalding was still alive and the last edition of his seminal work had appeared only a few years earlier. It is not to be ruled out that Fichte's choice for the title of his work was, in part, motivated by the design of inheriting the

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10. On the bibliographical details and the character of Spalding's work, see Günter Zöller, "Die Bestimmung der Bestimmung des Menschen bei Mendelssohn und Kant," in *Kant und die Berliner Aufklärung. Akten des 9. Internationalen Kant-Kongresses (26. bis 31. März 2000 in Berlin)*, ed. Volker Gerhardt, Rolf-Peter Horstmann, and Ralph Schumacher. 5 vols. (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2001), 4:476–89, esp. 477f.

11. These specifics refer to the thirteenth edition of 1794.

12. The publisher was Vossische Buchhandlung.

public and, presumably, pecuniary success of Spalding's almost identically titled prior publication. To the contemporary readership, Fichte's *Vocation* might well have presented itself as yet another updated and expanded version of Spalding's multi-edition *Vocation*.

But *The Vocation of Man* not only follows the conventions of a genre of edificatory prose established by Spalding. It also partakes in the prominent discourse of the German late Enlightenment, which had transposed the overtly religious orientation of Spalding's pioneering work into a definitional attempt at identifying the peculiar purpose of the human being. Mediated chiefly by the efforts of Moses Mendelssohn, the leading exponent of the Berlin Enlightenment, with its characteristic blend of Leibniz-Wolffian rationalism and pragmatic populism, Spalding's formula about the "vocation of the human being" soon became the catch phrase of a philosophical debate that spanned what was later to be identified and differentiated as physical and cultural anthropology, pedagogy, philosophy of history, political philosophy, and philosophy of culture. Rather than asking, "What is the human being?" (*Was ist der Mensch?*) and thereby perpetuating the ancient quest for essences and natural kinds, Mendelssohn and his contemporaries inquired after the future final state toward which the human being was to evolve and develop and the means and measures fit for such a human future.

In Mendelssohn, the vocation of the human being, which had been cast by Spalding in terms of a fictional personal development of improved insight and advanced outlook, is itself rendered in decidedly developmental terms as the called-for process of the actual formation of a human being's mental potential or faculties (*Ausbildung der Seelenfähigkeiten*).<sup>13</sup> Moreover, Mendelssohn distinguishes between the vocation of the human being *as such*, or its general vocation (*allgemeine Bestimmung*), and the vocation of the human being in a specific capacity, or its special vocation (*spezielle Bestimmung*). In both cases, the vocation, formally considered, consists for Mendelssohn in the gradual achievement of the perfection envisioned for each human being, in general and in particular, by the divine creator. While preordained as a human being's life goal, any such perfection is to be achieved by the human being himself (or herself) in a process of doubled self-perfection, viz., a perfecting of oneself by oneself. A further feature of the vocation of the human being to self-perfection, according

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13. See Günter Zöller, "Die Bestimmung der Bestimmung des Menschen bei Mendelssohn und Kant," esp. 483, note 34.

to Mendelssohn, is that the called-for self-improvement concerns the individual human being. Rather than locating the advancement of the human being at the level of the species (*Gattung*), Mendelssohn subjects each and every human being to the task of personal perfection.<sup>14</sup>

While Mendelssohn's creative appropriation of Spalding's project on the vocation of the human being had remained within the confines of the perfectionist ontology and rationalist theology of the Leibniz-Wolffian school philosophy, Kant's absorption of the vocational discourse into the critical philosophy involved substituting its onto-theological grounding by a fictionalist teleology of nature. For Kant, the virtual presence of human skills and practices in the quasi-biological manner of "germs" (*Keime*) or "predispositions" (*Anlagen*) is to be taken as an indication of their called-for gradual and eventual actualization. In that regard, the natural teleology of human beings partakes in nature's general economy of doing nothing in vain and for waste, or rather, of so having to be regarded from a critical standpoint that subjects the world in space and time to a concept of reason ("idea"; *Idee*).<sup>15</sup>

But Kant introduces a radical distinction in his natural teleology that prevents the complete naturalization of human existence by exempting the human being from the teleological principle observed in all other nature, which arranges for the entire actualization of a natural being's potential in each and every individual of a given species. By contrast, in human beings, according to Kant, the complete transformation of the virtual into the actual does not take place in the life of a given individual but only collectively and cumulatively at the level of the species. Kant cites as the reason for the human exemption from natural ontogenetic complete actualization what could be termed the meta-vocation of the human being, independent of and prior to any possible specific vocation, viz., its calling to actualize any and all of its potentialities, to the extent that they exceed animal functions, through its own design in planning and effort in executing. Human beings are, or rather are meant to be and hence ought to be, self-actualizers of their potentials, which operate not under the dictates of instinct but under self-chosen and self-maintained rules of reason.

Under conditions of its naturally induced emancipation from nature's tutelage, the vocation of the human being, according to Kant, is a laborious,

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14. *Ibid.*, esp. 485f., notes 44 and 45.

15. See Immanuel Kant, "Idea for a Universal History with a Cosmopolitan Aim," in Immanuel Kant, *Anthropology, History, and Education*, ed. Günter Zöllner and Robert B. Loudon (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 108–20, esp. 119f.



lengthy, and frustrating affair. No single individual can expect to achieve the vocation that is rather set out for the species as a whole to approximate over time and in different places. Accordingly, even the specific vocation of the human being, as detailed by Kant, is again fairly formal and contentually open. It concerns, in the first instance, the vocation of the human being to achieve the highest degree and extent in the development of its faculties and facilities (“culture”; *Kultur*) and, in the second instance, the achievement of a mode of conduct informed as well as motivated by reason alone, independent of countervailing inclinations (“morality”; *Moralität*). While Kant concedes that the latter goal—moral perfection—may well elude human efforts and ultimately require extrahuman assistance,<sup>16</sup> he locates the gradual approximation and eventual acquisition of cultural perfection in human history, albeit under the clandestine guidance of a quasi-instinctual, exclusively human disposition that lets human beings seek as much as flee each other’s company (“unsocial sociability”; *ungesellige Geselligkeit*) and clandestinely manipulates them into achieving a delicate balance between sought self-reliance and independence and needed mutual support and recognition.

To be sure, the human being is to achieve its cultural vocation only at the very end of human worldly history, when the process of civilization will have resulted in states that are justly administered internally and hence peaceful and that, moreover, stand in equally law-governed and peaceful relations to each other (“eternal peace”; *ewiger Friede*), allowing the undisturbed unfolding of human capacities and capabilities. In Kant, then, the vocation of the human being entails the politico-theological double project of a perfectly just world order and of a perfectly moral otherworldly order, each requiring tremendous human effort but none achievable by human efforts alone.

### The Separation of State and Realm

The complex vocational tradition from Spalding through Mendelssohn and Kant to Fichte that relates *The Vocation of Man* to the discourse of the German Enlightenment about the purpose and the path of human develop-

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16. See Kant’s rational reconstruction of the Christian and specifically the Protestant doctrine of grace in *Religion Within the Boundaries of Mere Reason*, in Immanuel Kant, *Religion and Rational Theology*, trans. and ed. Allen W. Wood and George di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 55–215, esp. 89–97.

ment undergoes a further stage of mediation through Fichte's own earlier recourse to the project of determining the "vocation of the human being." In his public lecture course at the University of Jena from the summer semester 1794, announced under the Latin title *de officiis eruditorum* (on the duties of the scholars) and subsequently published, in part, under the title "Some Lectures on the Vocation of the Scholar" (*Einige Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten*), Fichte had prepared the specific discussion of the vocation of the scholar in the fourth lecture with more general considerations "On the Vocation of the Human Being as Such" (*Ueber die Bestimmung des Menschen an sich*) in the first lecture and "On the Vocation of the Human Being in Society" (*Ueber die Bestimmung des Menschen in der Gesellschaft*) in the second lecture, before establishing the particular and central function of the scholar with respect to the vocation of the human being by expounding "On the Difference of the Estates in Society" (*Ueber die Verschiedenheit der Stände in der Gesellschaft*) in the third lecture.

Fichte's early contribution to the German vocational debate resorts to the main tenet of his simultaneously presented early presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* by distinguishing between the human being as an individuated, embodied, finite rational being and the I, more precisely the "pure I," as its self-identical core defined and determined by nothing than its own self-reverting activity. Accordingly, the vocation of the human being consists in its infinite striving for establishing perfect, unadulterated self-identity by means of the increasing elimination of anything other than the I ("Not-I"; *Nicht-Ich*). Fichte attributes the relentlessly dynamic as well as eternally interminable pursuit of identity that constitutes the vocation of the I a "drive" (*Trieb*) and demotes the vocation of the human being from a matter of possible, if unlikely achievement to a matter of the imperative pursuit of an impossible purpose, namely, to achieve total self-identity, or to become God.

Some five years later, in *The Vocation of Man*, Fichte retains the conceptuality of the drive when conveying the striving essentially involved in the human being's vocation to achieve and assert identity under the conditions of limitable but ineliminable difference. Due to the peculiar dramatic setting of the work, the successful statement of the vocation of the human being proceeds by contrast to a preceding erroneous attempt to identify "mere knowledge" (*bloßes Wissen*), that is, the theoretical cognition of what is the case, as one's vocation. The meditator of Fichte's work, a late, post-Kantian descendant of Spalding's religious meditator, comes to realize that not knowing but only doing (*Tun*), one's own doing, is able to provide him (or her) with the certainty of free and independent existence—and

even that only after skeptical considerations about the potentially delusionary nature of free practical activity have been overcome by deliberately embracing the epistemic authenticity of faith (*Glaube*) and conscience (*Gewissen*) as warrants of claims to freedom and independence.

With these preliminaries marking the transition from knowledge to faith in place, the presentation proper of the vocation of the human being is unfolded gradually in the four numbered but untitled subsections of the Third Book of *The Vocation of Man*. The first of those subsections distinguishes between two kinds of beings whose reality is established on the basis of faith and with regard to the vocation of the human being: other beings like myself (*meinesgleichen*), whose presence calls upon me to treat them with constant concern for their own freedom and dignity, and other beings unlike me, which are to be treated as the moral furniture of my world, providing me with occasions and limitations for the pursuit of my vocation.

The second subsection moves from the level of the given individual and its vocational relations to other individuals as well as objects to the political plane. The called-for acting on other subjects and on objects is to result in a change of the state of the world, and a better state of it at that. Fichte specifies the “vocation of our kind” (*Bestimmung unsers Geschlechts*)<sup>17</sup> to unite into a comprehensive body politic in an effort to alleviate mutual hostility and unjust distribution of natural and cultural goods. The “sole true state” so envisioned and prescribed possesses a “civil constitution” (*bürgerliche Verfassung*)<sup>18</sup> that assures inner as well as outer peace and the effective elimination of evil due to the removal of any purpose it might serve and achieve.<sup>19</sup> On Fichte’s view this political “purpose of our earthly life” (*Zweck unsers irdischen Lebens*)<sup>20</sup> is to be achieved in due course by human endeavors alone.

The third subsection inquires after the vocation of the human being that might lie beyond the reachable, if distant, goal of peace on earth. The reason for transcending the world of sense and its essentially juridico-political order is the factual ineffectiveness of willing the good and the contingent occurrence of good result from evil willing and doing. In contraposition to the world of sense and its, as well as our, resistance to willing and accomplishing what is good and commanded by conscience,

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17. Fichte, VM, 85 (translation modified); SW 2, 271.

18. Fichte, VM, 89; SW 2, 276.

19. See Fichte, VM, 89f.; SW 2, 276.

20. Fichte, VM, 90; SW 2, 278.

Fichte envisions a supersensory world—termed the “supersensible world” (*übersinnliche Welt*) or the “world of reason” (*Vernunftwelt*)<sup>21</sup>—in which the good will possesses effective causality, a world governed by moral laws much the same way that the world of sense is ruled by natural laws.

For Fichte, this “second world” (*zweite Welt*)<sup>22</sup> to which the moral vocation of the human being refers him (or her) is not a future world or an otherworldly world (“heaven”) but an order to which every human being considered as a moral being capable and called upon to enact the good will always already belongs. Drawing on the political conceptuality of citizenry employed already by Leibniz and Kant to address the dual membership of the human being in the natural and the supranatural order, Fichte locates the vocation of the human being in its ethico-political status as “fellow citizen of the realm of freedom” (*Mitbürger des Reiches der Freiheit*).<sup>23</sup>

In a surprising turn away from the announced final focus of *The Vocation of Man* on faith, Fichte portrays the membership in the moral world as a matter not of faithfully believing in another life but of “envisioning” (*Schauen*) it. While the term *faith* describes the belief-based anticipation of another, future world to be awaited, the actual counterfactual transposition into this world already here and now involves envisioning that other life to the point of actually leading it—here and now. Accordingly, the fourth and final subsection of the Third Book of *The Vocation of Man* addresses the transition from the attachment to the better world through feeling and through the organ of the “heart” to the vision of the other, better world by the organ of the “eye,”<sup>24</sup> more precisely the “religious eye” (*religiöses Auge*) or the “spiritual eye” (*geistiges Auge*).<sup>25</sup>

The final transition from the moral to the religious perspective or standpoint on the world and its duality involves the further expansion of the will, which so far encompassed the individual will and the plurality of individual wills under laws of their compatibility and cooperation, to include the supreme legislative will that is represented and addressed in religious terms as “that sublime will” (*jener erhabene Wille*) and “eternal will” (*jener ewige Wille*).<sup>26</sup> In addition to serving as the lawgiver for

21. Fichte, VM, 94 (translation modified); SW 2, 282f.

22. Fichte, VM, 95; SW 2, 284.

23. Fichte, VM, 95 (translation modified); SW 2, 283.

24. Fichte, VM, 117; SW 2, 311.

25. Fichte, VM, 120, 123; SW 2, 315, 318.

26. Fichte, VM, 106, 110; SW 2, 298, 303.

the individual's will, thereby prescribing it its vocation, the divine will functions as the guarantor for the purposive interaction of the individual wills assuring their "unification" (*Vereinigung*) and "immediate interaction" (*unmittelbare Wechselwirkung*).<sup>27</sup>

Yet Fichte resists the theological temptation to turn the moral master of the world also into the creator of the material world. On Fichte's idealist outlook, which also prevails on the final pages of *The Vocation of Man*, the world of matter and sense is entirely the creation of finite, rather than infinite, reason.<sup>28</sup> Even in its populist guise, Fichte's theology remains ethico-political and transcendental—a sustained reflection on the conditions of the possibility of the realm of freedom. The theologico-political agenda of *The Vocation of Man*, especially of its Third Book, was to be carried out in speculative as well as historical detail in Fichte's last finished lecture course on the relation of the "proto-state" (*Urstaat*) to the "realm of reason" (*Vernunftreich*) from 1813, published posthumously in 1820 under the title "*Die Staatslehre*" (The Doctrine of the State), at the center of which figures the theologico-political distinction between the external juridical order and the internal moral order of the world. In line with the final section of its precursor from 1800, the operative term in the later work for envisioning and advancing the cause of freedom from external natural and political bondage is no longer faith (*Glaube*) but insight (*Einsicht*).<sup>29</sup>

Given the overdetermined character of Fichte's work from 1800, which is fraught and overwrought with apologetics toward and identification with the aggressor, it seems indicated to regard as Fichte's true treatment of the vocation of the human being—of its theologico-political vocation—the political theology and theological politology of the late so-called *Staatslehre*.<sup>30</sup>

27. Fichte, VM, 108 (translation modified) 168, SW 2, 299 (emphasis in the original).

28. See Fichte, VM, 110; SW 2, 303.

29. See SW 4, 524f. See also the recently published student transcript of part of the lectures from 1813 that underlay the published version of 1820 in GA IV/6, 323–49 (Darstellung des Christenthums 1813—Nachschrift Halle).

30. On Fichte's late political theology, political philosophy, and political pedagogy in the so-called *Staatslehre*, see Günter Zöller "‘Freiheit aller von der Freiheit aller.’ Das Reich des Rechts in Fichtes geschichtsphilosophischer Staatslehre," in *Übertragene Anfänge. Imperiale Figurationen um 1800*, ed. Tobias Döring, Barbara Vinken, and Günter Zöller (München: Fink, 2010), 199–213; and "‘Menschenbildung.’ Staatspolitische Erziehung beim späten Fichte," in *Bildung als Mittel und Selbstzweck. Korrektive Erinnerung wider die Verengung des Bildungsbegriffs*, ed. Axel Hutter and Markus Kartheiniger (Freiburg i. Br./München: Alber, 2009), 42–62.

# Fichte's Philosophical *Bildungsroman*

BENJAMIN CROWE

Fichte's first major publication of the new nineteenth century, *Bestimmung des Menschen* (hereafter *Vocation of Man*), stands out within his corpus for a number of reasons. In comparison with his other self-described "popular" writings—*Bestimmung des Gelehrten* (1794 and of 1809), *Religionslehre* (1806), *Reden an die deutsche Nation* (1808), to name the most well known—*The Vocation of Man* was never delivered as an oration, and is not organized like one. Its distinctive literary features were noted by some of its first readers.<sup>1</sup> Hence, the natural question, What sort of a work is this? My suggestion is that some light can be shed on the character of this important work by considering two facts about Fichte's intellectual development. In the late 1780s, as he contemplated his own intellectual vocation, Fichte came under the influence of various exemplars of the popular eighteenth-century genre of the "philosophical novel." These included didactic narratives, political utopias, semi-fictional autobiographies, and early instances of the *Bildungsroman*. Many of the works mentioned by Fichte involve a dialectical pattern (one that is oftentimes tripartite) that is meant to model a particular author's vision of the aims and nature of a process of self-formation. This pattern turns out to be mirrored in the unusual structure of Fichte's *Vocation of Man*. The *dialectical* nature of the pattern is put to use by Fichte to show up the limitations of various ill-formed or hypertrophied configurations of a person's practical identity.

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1. Reinhard Lauth and Hans Gliwitsky point to several early reviews that single out the distinctive literary quality of the work in their introduction to the critical edition of the text (GA I/6, 162–67).

My discussion proceeds as follows. First, I examine Fichte's familiarity with, and evident enthusiasm for, different types of philosophical novels during the 1780s and '90s. Along with several long-forgotten authors of utopian fiction, Montaigne, Wieland, Jacobi, and Friedrich Schlegel emerge as important figures in Fichte's intellectual development. Along the way, I draw out a common structure or pattern that can be found in most of the works of these authors. After setting the stage, I then turn to the *Vocation of Man* itself. I argue that this work instantiates this common pattern in order to present an ideal model of self-formation.

### Fichte and the Philosophical Novel

Fichte's *Nachlaß*, along with his collected correspondence, provide us with important insights into various facets of his intellectual development at different stages of his career. These sources are particularly invaluable with respect to the earliest stage (i.e., the 1780s), since Fichte did not publish anything until 1792, and it was even later that he published under his own name. In the case of this early stage, we learn some important things about Fichte's intellectual aspirations and about some important influences on these; these facts can help determine the nature and structure of the much later *Vocation of Man*.<sup>2</sup> After discussing what can be learned in more precise detail, I will then turn to some evidence found in Fichte's writings of the 1790s, when he had become famous as a champion of idealist philosophy.

Two of the more remarkable products of Fichte's literary activities in the 1780s include an enigmatic little text entitled "Accidental Thoughts on a Sleepless Night" (GA II/1, 103–10), and a fragmentary novel called *The Valley of Lovers* (GA II/1, 267–81). Both are dated to 1788. The former is of particular interest, in that Fichte here sets forth his authorial ambitions and, most importantly, some of the contemporary authors whose work inspires these ambitions. Fichte outlines a didactic work that purports to be letters from a French explorer to another aristocrat, in which the explorer details his travels to the South Pole. The letters describe a hitherto unknown society that the explorer has discovered, which turns out to be a

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2. Still the best study of the earliest period of Fichte's thought is undoubtedly Reiner Preul, *Reflexion und Gefühl: Die Theologie Fichtes in seiner vorkantischen Zeit* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1969). In addition to providing careful exegesis of these early texts, Preul offers a number of convincing arguments in support of the claim that these early writings constitute a very significant moment in Fichte's intellectual career.

fairly faithful mirror of late-eighteenth-century European society, detailing the moral corruption of various classes. Fichte's primary concern about his own society is that its corrupt state fosters a "contradictory character," in which "the understanding [*Einsichten*] is in eternal contradiction with the heart and morals [*Sitten*]" (GA II/1, 103). The contradiction that worries Fichte here is less a *formal* or *logical* one than a *moral* or *characterological* one. The nature of his society is such that people are incapable for forming coherent practical identities. This concern with unifying one's sense of oneself as an agent is not simply an artifact of Fichte's early period, but remains with him throughout his subsequent career, and, indeed, figures centrally in the *Vocation of Man*.

Before sketching out his imaginary epistles, Fichte cites three authors who are largely forgotten now, but for whom he clearly has a special fondness. The first is Christian Gotthilf Salzmann (1744–1811), author of *Carl von Carlsberg oder über das menschliche Elend* (1784–88). Salzmann was a sentimentalist educational reformer greatly influenced by Rousseau. The second author is Christian Sintentis (1750–1820), whose two-volume *Hallo' glücklicher Abend* is cited here by Fichte. Sintentis was a popular theologian and author of political utopias in the *Hausväterliteratur* tradition. Works in this tradition were didactic in nature, and were addressed to the male heads of households with the aim of affecting a kind of top-down moral reform of the family. The novel Fichte cites is, indeed, about a paternalistic reformer. Finally, Fichte cites the more well-known J. H. Pestalozzi (1746–1827), Swiss pedagogical theorist whose *Lionhard und Gertrud. Ein Buch für das Volk*, of a similarly didactic nature, was wildly popular at the time. Pestalozzi was based in Zürich, where Fichte lived at various times during the latter part of the 1780s. He was a member of Lavater's circle, with which Fichte had important and well-documented contacts. Pestalozzi's overriding pedagogical concern was with the formation of a well-rounded moral personality. His antiauthoritarian views no doubt appealed greatly to Fichte. Religiously, Pestalozzi held a minimal, moralistic theology similar to that of Rousseau and, indeed, to that which Fichte himself defends during the so-called Atheism Controversy.

What can we learn, then, from "Accidental Thoughts"? First, as he struggled to define his place within the larger "republic of letters," Fichte clearly flirted with the idea of becoming the author of philosophical fiction. His fragmentary *The Valley of the Lovers* attests to this as well. Fichte's models in this project were writers deeply concerned with questions of morality and of education. Thus, not surprisingly, they also presented ideal models of processes whereby a morally perfect character could be best formed.



A letter to Marie Christiane von Koppenfels, dated from the summer of 1790, also sheds some useful light on Fichte's literary idols. His "favorite authors" are, "among the French, Rousseau and Montaigne, among the Germans, Lessing, Wieland, Goethe's recent works" (GA III/1, 134). This list is slightly more illuminating than that found in "Accidental Thoughts," if only because the names Fichte lists are all quite well known. Here, I will single out only two for further comment: Montaigne and Wieland. Fichte's mentioning of Montaigne is somewhat surprising, given the latter's famous attacks on speculative approaches to philosophy. But, if one looks a bit more closely, one begins to see something in Montaigne that bears directly on the shape of the *Vocation of Man*. Montaigne's *Essais* are exercises in free self-reflection. In writings such as "On the Education of Children," Montaigne argues that the essence of philosophy is a kind of facility in judgment, which, when unfettered by scholastic conceptual frameworks, makes possible a kind of self-discovery. In "Of Vain Subtleties," Montaigne presents this self-reflection as a dialectical process, moving from a state of simplicity, through skeptical doubt, to the reestablishment of a kind of *faith* in the ordinary.<sup>3</sup>

Strikingly, one finds a similar pattern, and a similar conception of the role of independent reasoning, in some of Fichte's writings from the 1790s. For example, in a passage from 1794–95 lectures on Platner's *Philosophischen Aphorismen*, Fichte tells his students that his aim is to lead them from "common sense," through "doubt," to "autonomy [*Selbstständigkeit*]" (GA II/4, 41–43). As he puts it toward the end of this manuscript:

Through freedom, and with our knowledge, we must again reoccupy the standpoint upon which we stood previously through mere natural instinct. It is thus for the sake of elevating ourselves to true autonomy, so that we are everything that we are through ourselves. (GA II/4, 46)

In a parallel way, in a 1796–97 manuscript, Fichte writes:

There are three epochs of humanity: the state of nature, that of culture [*Bildens*], and that of perfection [*Vollendung*]. It is the

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3. This dialectic element of Montaigne's work has been well articulated by Ann Hartle in her recent study, *Michel de Montaigne: Accidental Philosopher* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

same with knowledge. Philosophy returns us to our naive belief in what is outside of our consciousness, in that it resolves noted contradictions in it. Its result is stability [*Festigkeit*], unshakeability of the manner of thought, on the basis of conviction. (GA II/4, 54)

What is significant about these passages, when read alongside Fichte's professed admiration from Montaigne, is that they present philosophy as a *process*. More specifically, philosophy is a *dialectical* process that involves the articulation and subsequent resolution of contradictions. Most important of all is the fact that, like Montaigne, Fichte thinks that the goal of this process is not so much contemplative knowledge but rather *autonomous agency*.

The other name from Fichte's list that I want to focus on is Wieland. Wieland's *Geschichte des Agathons* (1766–67) is a genuine watershed in modern literature, not least because it is widely regarded as the first *Bildungsroman*.<sup>4</sup> Wieland was, like Fichte, very interested in questions of moral formation and education, as his early "Plan einer Akademie zu Bildung des Verstandes und des Herzens junger Leute" (1758) demonstrates. The novel is quite clearly the literary product of Wieland's ideas on these subjects. The hero, Agathon, passes from a stage of "sensuality," through "reason" or "reflection" (including a stint at Plato's Academy), to a kind of equilibrium or harmony between these two aspects of the self. This ideal of harmony between reason and sensuality appears in many places in Fichte's writings, as his complaint in "Accidental Thoughts" shows. Like Montaigne, Wieland presents a three-stage process of moral formation, much as Fichte does in the *Vocation of Man*.

Fichte's interest in philosophical novels did not disappear when he finally resolved his vocational crisis in favor of academic philosophy. On the contrary, during the 1790s, Fichte had personal relationships, however fraught they might have been, with two noteworthy practitioners of the art: J. H. Jacobi and Friedrich Schlegel. Fichte proclaims to Jacobi, in a note enclosed with a copy of the recently published *Grundlage des gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*, that "[i]f there is one thinker in Germany with whom I desire and hope to agree in my own opinions, then it is you, most honored sir" (GA III/2, 202). Later on, in an important letter of August 30,

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4. For a helpful discussion of Wieland's position within the eighteenth-century discussion of *Bildung* and the ideal of the "beautiful soul," see Robert E. Norton, *The Beautiful Soul: Aesthetic Morality in the Eighteenth Century* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995).

1795, Fichte tells Jacobi that he has spent the summer rereading his works, particularly the novel *Edward Allwills Briefsammlung* (GA III/2, 391). This example is particularly interesting. In the novel, Jacobi presents the failure of a hypertrophied self (the title character), who oscillates between being an impulsive *Herzenmensch* and a kind of insubstantial ultra-rationalist. Fichte's letter to Jacobi also touches on the important notion of the philosophical retrieval of common sense via a kind of skeptical dialectic.

Regarding Schlegel, Fichte praises his controversial novel *Lucinde* as "one of the greatest products of genius that I know," confessing to his wife that "I am now reading it for the third time, and I like it better with every new reading" (GA III/4, 67). *Lucinde* is also clearly a philosophical novel. Though the typically Romantic blending of genres makes it difficult to categorize neatly, *Lucinde* clearly bears some of the features of a more traditional *Bildungsroman*. Its subject is the moral formation of its primary character, Julius, through various relationships, into someone who is internally coherent and yet avoids the vice of narrowness, and so embodies Schlegel's ideal of the "chaotic system."

It is quite clear, then, that Fichte was thoroughly steeped in the world of the eighteenth-century philosophical novel, and was even familiar with some important precursors in other genres (i.e., Montaigne's *Essais*). All of the authors and works named explicitly by Fichte are concerned with issues of education and moral formation. Particularly in the case of Montaigne and Wieland, they present a tripartite process of formation that is structurally quite similar to the *Vocation of Man* and to comments found in other texts by Fichte. Many of the novels he refers to involve portrayals of the failed personalities of hypertrophied individuals, or else they describe a process whereby an individual achieves a kind of balanced, harmonious self. All of these elements appear, in uniquely Fichtean form, in the *Vocation of Man*. The work presents a tripartite process whereby the narrator moves from common sense, through various stages of doubt, to faith as a "voluntary acquiescence in our natural view" (I/6, 257).

### Moral Formation in the *Vocation of Man*

In the Preface of the *Vocation of Man*, Fichte summarizes the purpose of the work in striking terms: "It should draw upward and inflame [*erwärmen*] the reader, sweeping him forcefully from the sensible to the supersensible" (GA I/6, 189). At face value, this language echoes that of the Platonic ascent, a recurring theme in Christian literature from Gregory of Nyssa and

John Climacus in the East, to Augustine and Bonaventure in the West. Traditionally, the ascent in question has combined both moral formation and, in keeping with its Platonic roots, the deepening, or, rather, heightening, of one's metaphysical understanding of the world. One might expect the same from Fichte; however, as becomes clear fairly early on, Fichte is more interested in moral formation. The change of view involved is not so much from a theoretical outlook mired in the sensible world to one firmly established in the realm of pure intelligibles, but rather from common sense, as a *practical* stance, through various unsatisfactory positions that fail as *practical stances*, to a perspective on one's agency that Fichte deems considerably more satisfactory.

That Fichte is operating from the standpoint of the agent, rather than from a purely theoretical standpoint, emerges at the beginning of Book I. Here, Fichte presents what we might call "common sense" not so much as a set of beliefs that we take for granted, but rather as the point of view from which we most often act. "I proceed with firm steps into the familiar sphere of my world," he writes, "and in each moment risk my existence and well-being on the inerrancy of my convictions" (GA I/6, 191). It is only when Fichte's narrator asks, "What am I, and what is my vocation?" that the unruffled confidence of common sense begins to give way. The problem with common sense is not so much that it lacks metaphysical depth, but rather that there is a sense in which the complex of beliefs, attitudes, intentions, and so forth that constitute it are not genuinely *my own*, because this complex is not the product of reflection (GA I/6, 192). To be satisfied with such a state of affairs is, says Fichte's narrator, a failure to respect oneself (GA I/6, 192). What needs to be achieved is a kind of *autonomy*, in the sense of reflective endorsement of first order "common sense." This much is clear from the narrator's resolve, which sounds strikingly like something one might read in Montaigne's *Essais*: "At this moment I will enter into my rights, and take possession of my inborn dignity. Let everything alien be given up. I will investigate *myself*" (GA I/6, 192).<sup>5</sup>

The first stop on the narrator's process of self-reflection is a naturalistic outlook that includes a deterministic view of change in nature (GA I/6, 193–95). Fichte articulates the position here in a way that recalls his discussions of the "formative force" in the natural constitution of human

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5. Later, at the end of Book I, Fichte reiterates this guiding motive behind the work, when he says that what the theoretical stance developed there cannot do is to help him to be something *for himself* (GA I/6, 208–209).

beings in the *System of Ethics* of 1798. More important than the details of this account is the fact that the question of *agency* returns. What Fichte's narrator is looking for is a viable practical stance, and it is on these grounds that this naturalistic outlook fails. On this outlook, "I myself, along with all that I call mine, am a link in this chain of natural necessity" (GA I/6, 199). In particular, the *self* turns out to be constituted entirely of what we might think of as inherited characteristics and external causal influences (GA I/6, 199). To attribute these components to me would be, at least from the point of view of this naturalistic outlook, like saying that "I existed before I was so that I could bring myself into existence" (GA I/6, 199). A human being, on this naturalistic view, is simply the harmonious confluence of natural forces, or rather, of a single force, the "human-forming force" (GA I/6, 201). Fichte's narrator is quite clear about the implications of this perspective when it comes to agency:

I am what the human-forming force could become—given that it was what it was, that it is still what it is outside of me, and that it subsists in these determinate relations to other, opposed, natural forces—and because there is not basis in it for it to limit itself, it *must* become what it can become. (GA I/6, 201)

The narrator professes himself to be quite satisfied, at least *intellectually*, with this picture of things. Everything (literally) fits together into a coherent, law-governed totality, and one can understand oneself, as a conscious entity, as a kind of perspective that the forces of nature collectively take on themselves (GA I/6, 203–207). The narrator's "hankering for knowledge [*Wißbegier*]," that is, *theoretical* knowledge, seems entirely satisfied (GA I/6, 207). The problem, however, which no doubt made Fichte entitle this section of the text "Doubt," is that there is no sense in which this theoretical stance constitutes a viable *practical* one. Indeed, it cannot do so, since it entails the judgment that "I do not act, rather, nature acts in me" (GA I/6, 207). What has gone wrong is that Fichte's narrator has adopted what Bernard Williams famously labels the "point of view of the universe" on himself as an agent. Being an agent, however, is something that is quite unintelligible from this point of view. Thus, not surprisingly, Fichte's narrator confesses his "revulsion" at this outcome (GA I/6, 207). This leads to a fatal split between what he seems compelled to hold as a result of theoretical reflection and what he calls the "innermost root of my existence" (GA I/6, 208–209). Again, Williams's work is instructive here; by adopting the "point of view of the universe" on oneself, one is forced

to abstract away from the concerns, values, intentions, and so forth that are constitutive of one's outlook on oneself as an *agent*, rather than as either a passive spectator or, worse, merely the object of such a spectator. One way to put the problem, which is indeed how Fichte puts it, is that the "point of view of the universe" is not an outlook that can actually be coherently *implemented* by someone.

Book II, as its title "Knowledge" suggests, also presents what we might regard as a purely *theoretical* outlook. Like a latter-day Boethius, Fichte's narrator is visited at midnight by a personified "Spirit" or "Mind," who represents reason. Book II is, for this reason, the most overtly *pedagogical* part of the work; it is structured as a dialogue in which Spirit tries to argue the narrator into various positions. First, Spirit gets the narrator to accept a kind of phenomenalism (or what Fichte elsewhere, following Kant, would call "subjective idealism") (GA I/6, 217). Spirit is quite willing to acknowledge that this position is altogether foreign to the narrator's "usual" conception of things and the language that expresses this conception; nevertheless, says Spirit, reason compels one's assent to it (GA I/6, 217). From the point of view of the later development of the work, this looks like a clear hint that something is going to be wrong with this view, just as there had been something wrong with the naturalistic outlook presented in Book I.

At one point in Book II, the conversation takes a surprising turn. Fichte's narrator now takes hold of the pedagogical wheel, guiding the Spirit through a series of considerations leading to the concept of the "I" as the *subject* of cognition (GA I/6, 234–35). This is, perhaps, not a surprising move, given that the question that moves the narrator to go beyond common sense in the first place is "What am I?," and given also that the failure of the naturalistic outlook of Book I lies quite clearly in its inability to make good sense of the first-person standpoint of an agent. As the conversation progresses, the narrator and the Spirit rehearse some of the historical debates about the representational structure of consciousness and the relationship between apperception and experience (GA I/6, 236–39). One gets the sense, however, that this part of the discussion is slightly beside the point, particularly since Spirit triumphantly asserts that its view *frees* the narrator from the chains of necessity, despite the fact that the argument to that point is less than decisive in this regard (GA I/6, 247).

At this point, the core issue returns; Fichte's narrator denounces the Spirit's view as *nihilism* (perhaps echoing Jacobi's open letter "To Fichte"). Why is it nihilistic? The I is now, like every other representation, a mere "product of thought, something that is simply made up [*Erdachtes*]" that I *have* to "make up" according to some inscrutable law of thought (GA I/6,

249). This is nihilism because, as in the naturalistic outlook, Fichte's narrator has lost touch with the only "I" that matters, the *agent* I, comprised of the concerns, intentions, and attitudes that motivate one to act and, crucially, for which one takes ownership.

That Spirit's view in Book II fails for just this reason is made clear by the narrator in Book III, where he tells himself that "mere knowing," or "idle contemplation," is not his vocation, but *action* (GA I/6, 253). In other words, one simply cannot legitimately substitute the "point of view of the universe" for a properly practical perspective. For Fichte's narrator, it is crucial to the latter that it does justice to the human drive for reflective autonomy (GA I/6, 254). This, after all, is the drive that motivates the whole series of reflections that comprise the book. The goal is to find some "system" that is not a "confusing mirror," but rather a picture of oneself that one can actually endorse and, most importantly, implement (GA I/6, 257). This must be a picture that preserves, rather than undermines or conflicts with, our first-person agent orientation. Fichte calls it "faith" (GA I/6, 257). This is, however, a *reflective* faith, otherwise it simply cannot satisfy the demand for autonomy that motivates the work (GA I/6, 258–59). To be free, for Fichte's narrator, is to act for a reason; thus, reflection is constitutive of the freedom that we do, in fact, possess (GA I/6, 259). Through reflection, the narrator can will "to be his own work" (GA I/6, 261).

What Fichte calls "faith" here is, then, fundamentally a stance on one's agency. To see what it involves, and how it works, one must first see what rational agency amounts to. This is indeed how Fichte's narrator proceeds. He takes it as axiomatic that all activity is purposive or goal-directed (GA I/6, 265). In order to count as *rational* activity, however, the purpose of the action cannot be arbitrary (GA I/6, 265–66). An action does not count as a rational action, as doing something for a reason, unless there is some nonarbitrary constraint on the particular purposes that one chooses to pursue. Fichte's narrator makes this point by saying that we must see that our actions are oriented toward another *world*, a new, importantly *better* one, otherwise they lose their point and become a mere game (GA I/6, 267). Over and above this, however, we need some perspective on our agency on which our actions actually *do* promote this better world. We need to understand that the "will, as it lies hidden from all mortal eyes in the secret darkness of my heart," is in fact "the first link in a chain of results that runs through the whole invisible realm of spirits" (GA I/6, 280). The narrator describes this point of view as a kind of "heaven on earth," a stance that one actually *lives* out in the here and now (GA I/6,

280). Importantly, this is a perspective that allows one to *freely* follow the dictates of conscience (i.e., to exercise rational agency).

The argument here is that, given what rational agency is, only the stance described here constitutes a practically viable position. Recall that, to answer fully to the demands that initiated these reflections, the stance in question must be one in which I can come to see my life as *my own*. Strikingly, Fichte's narrator argues that this stance is only intelligible on the further assumption of a "law" that is *not* furnished by myself, by any other finite being, or even by the collective of finite beings (GA I/6, 290). This point seems to strike Fichte as important enough that he reiterates it several times. For instance, he writes:

Just as little does a finite will give the law to the supersensible world, which no finite mind can comprehend; rather all finite wills are subjected to its law, and can only bring something forth in this world to the extent that this law is already present and they submit themselves dutifully to its condition and enter the sphere of its efficacy in accordance with its fundamental law for finite wills. (GA I/6, 290–91)

In other words, the point of view of faith requires the acknowledgment of "Infinite Reason" (GA I/6, 295), a "Sublime Living Will" (GA I/6, 296). Importantly, it is only once this self-conception is established that the narrator experiences "the most perfect harmony" in a "childlike simplicity" (GA I/6, 296). One has returned to the "familiar sphere" from which one embarked. What was sought was a *practical* self-conception that was achieved through reflection, rather than being simply given. What has been gained is a view of oneself on which one can confidently endorse a life lived for the sake of morality.

## Conclusion

The tripartite structure of the *Vocation of Man* traces out a move from a self-assured, but nonautonomous practical stance, through stances that are unviable largely on account of their theoretical nature, to a kind of reflective reappropriation of the initial confidence of common sense. This dialectical pattern echoes that found in many of Fichte's favorite authors on moral education. Like the hero of an eighteenth-century *Bildungsroman*,



the narrator of the *Vocation of Man* encounters the limitations of *both* unreflective common sense *and* a kind of hypertrophied rationality. In the first instance, one is not properly oneself due to a lack of reflection. In the second, one is not properly oneself because one's convictions render the project of *being properly oneself* unintelligible. Like the characters in Jacobi's novels and Schlegel's *Lucinde*, Fichte's narrator moves forward in part through the intervention of another (i.e., the Spirit in Book II). In the end, like Montaigne, Fichte's narrator discovers the limitations of theoretical reason and arrives at a kind of reflective faith in himself.

*Bestimmung* as *Bildung*  
 On Reading Fichte's  
*Vocation of Man* as a *Bildungsroman*

ELIZABETH MILLÁN

*Was suchst Du doch mein klagendes Herz?*  
 The Philosopher of Freedom Meets the Singer of Fados

At the heart of the *Bestimmung* text is Fichte's commitment to analyzing the idea of freedom. This is not surprising: Fichte is a philosopher of freedom. G. E. Moore, given his famous or infamous, "Refutation of Idealism,"<sup>1</sup> is an unlikely cheerleader for Fichte. But even Moore, in a review of an early translation into English (a translation that Moore despised, among other reasons because it completely botched "Fichte's simple and forcible style") of Fichte's *Sittenlehre*, praises Fichte's attention to freedom: "[Fichte's work on ethics] contains the most thoroughgoing attempt ever made to build a complete ethical system solely on the basis of freedom."<sup>2</sup> In an introduction to the English translation of the *Bestimmung* text, Roderick Chisholm also focuses on the notion of freedom, claiming that

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1. Unlikely in light of his famous or infamous "Refutation of Idealism," *Mind* (1903): 433–53.

2. Review of *The Science of Ethics as Based on the Science of Knowledge*, *International Journal of Ethics* 9, no. 1 (October 1898): 92–97, at p. 96.

The system of freedom satisfies my heart; the opposite system kills and annihilates it. To stand there, cold and dead and merely to look at the change of events an inert mirror of fleeting forms—that is an unbearable existence and I disdain and deplore it. I want to love, I want to lose myself in taking an interest, I want to be glad and be sad. For me the highest object of this interest is myself, and the only thing in me with which I can give it an ongoing content is my activity. I want to do everything for the best; want to feel glad about myself when I have done well, and be sad about myself when I have done badly. And even this sadness is to be sweet to me, for it is interest in myself and a pledge of future improvement. Only in love is there life, without it there is death and annihilation.<sup>6</sup>

A question that Fichte takes most seriously in the *Bestimmung* text is the question of whether “love [shall] be made subordinate to knowledge or knowledge to love?” [*ob der Erkenntnis die Liebe, oder der Liebe die Erkenntnis untergeordnet werden soll*].<sup>7</sup> Our hero remains, “*unentschieden*” and moreover has “*schlechthin keinen Entscheidungs-Grund weder für das Eine noch für das Andere*.”<sup>8</sup> A key character in reaching some sort of decision on this matter of whether love shall be made subject to knowledge or knowledge to love is the Spirit.

And because the preservation of freedom is central in the journey that our hero (which is our own self) has to undertake, the Spirit cannot make our decision for us, but rather can help clear the path for us to reach a decision on our own terms. The Spirit wishes to “free [us] from [our] false knowledge” but by no means “to teach [us] the truth” [*Ich wollte dich, von deinem falschen Wissen befreien; keineswegs aber dir das wahre beibringen*].<sup>9</sup> If the Spirit were to bring us to truth and spare us the journey, then our freedom would be compromised: we must have the independence to bring ourselves to truth. The aim of the Spirit is to “destroy and annihilate” error [*es zerstört und vernichtet den Irrtum*],<sup>10</sup> thus opening the path to the truth and ultimately to our freedom; and this path is one that we alone must forge. We can be aided in the process of doubt, but knowledge must be obtained by us alone. As the Spirit tells us:

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6. VM(LLA), 24/BM, 32.

7. VM(LLA), 26/BM, 34.

8. Ibid.

9. VM(LLA), 64/BM, 82.

10. VM(LLA), 65/BM, 83.

[t]he argument of *The Vocation of Man* is essentially this: If we were to consider only what seems to be the position of man in nature, we would be led to a false conception of man. We would be led to suppose that he is a product of natural forces, both physiologically and psychologically, and that all of his actions, like other physical events, are the inevitable results of the conditions under which they happen to occur. But if we consider the way in which we come to *know* the physical world, we will find that this world is a product of our own mental activity. And if we take seriously the demands of our moral consciousness, we will see that in the “true world”—a world which transcends nature—“human existence is one with the Divine.”<sup>3</sup>

In the three books of *The Vocation of Man*, that is, through Doubt, Knowledge, and Faith, Fichte attempts to get at the true relation between our actions and the system of nature, that is, he attempts to present our condition of freedom in the world. One is reminded of the drama used by Kant to frame his *Critique of Pure Reason*: the antinomies. The Third Antinomy brings us to the problem of freedom in tension with the deterministic system of nature. In the Third Antinomy we are presented with the Thesis: “Causality, according to the laws of nature, is not the only causality from which all the phenomena of the world can be deduced. In order to account for these phenomena it is necessary also to admit another causality, that of freedom.” And then with the Antithesis: “There is no freedom, but everything in the world takes place entirely according to the laws of nature.”<sup>4</sup> This antinomy is a variation on the theme of the relation between our actions and the system of nature, the very theme around which Fichte’s *Bestimmung* text is centered. Kant presents the problem of finding room for human freedom in a world determined by natural laws as a logical problem. Kant’s drama of reason does not have characters, dialogue, passionate claims of the heart. If a person were inclined to think that the third antinomy had no vital relevance for their life, a reading of Fichte’s *Bestimmung* text might change that view. Consider, for example, the claim from Book One, “Doubt,” of Fichte’s *Bestimmung* text, which in the tone of its rhetoric is closer to the melodrama of a Portuguese *fado*<sup>5</sup> than a passage from a cold, calculating philosopher:

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3. VM(LLA), vii.

4. KrV, A444–45/B472–73.

5. Since the meeting at which this paper was presented was held in Lisbon, Portugal, I could not resist paying tribute to one of Portugal’s most beautiful musical traditions.

[Y]ou are looking for something real lying beyond the mere image. This is your right, as I well know. And you are looking for a reality other than the one which has just been annihilated. I know that as well. But your effort would be in vain were to you to try to produce it through your knowledge and from your knowledge and to grasp it with your knowledge. If you have no other means of grasping it, then you will never find it.

But you have such a means. Put some life into it and warm it up, and you will attain to complete tranquility. I leave you alone with yourself.<sup>11</sup>

What is it that we seek when we search for truth? Fichte brings the passion back to our love of wisdom when he asks, at the beginning of Book 3, *Faith*: “Was suchst Du doch mein klagendes Herz?”<sup>12</sup>

### Taming the Self-Devouring Monster: Nature and Freedom Revisited

What does the searching of the lamenting heart have to do with freedom? And what does it have to do with our *Bestimmung*, with our *Bildung*? One thing that Fichte’s *klagendes Herz* is searching for is independence:

There is in me a drive to absolute independent self-activity. I find nothing more intolerable than only to be in another, for another, and through another. I want to be and become something for and through myself. I feel this drive just as soon as ever I become aware of myself; it is indivisibly united with the consciousness of myself. . . . Who am I? Subject and object in one, the omnipresent knower and known, the intuiting and the intuited, the thinker and the thought at once. As both I am to be through myself and what I am, to originate concepts simply through myself, and simply through myself to produce a condition lying beyond the concept.<sup>13</sup>

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11. Ibid.

12. VM(LLA), 66/BM, 84.

13. VM(LLA), 68/BM, 85–86.

This solitary independence is something that lies beyond mere presentation and knowledge: “All my conviction is only faith; and it proceeds from my disposition, not from the intellect” [*Alle meine Überzeugung ist nur Glaube, und sie kommt aus der Gesinnung, nicht aus dem Verstand*].<sup>14</sup> Hence, “all education [*Bildung*] of myself and of others” proceeds from the will, not from the intellect.<sup>15</sup> And, “If the will is steadily and sincerely directed at the good, then the [intellect] will of itself apprehend the true” [*Ist nur (die Wille) unverrückt und redlich auf das Gute gerichtet, so wird (der Verstand) von selbst das Wahre fassen*].<sup>16</sup> In contrast, “If only the [intellect] is exercised while the [will] is neglected, then nothing more will come of it than a facility for racking one’s brain with intellectual quibbling, which leads to nothing” [*eine Fertigkeit, ins unbedingt Leere hinaus zu grübeln und zu klügeln*].<sup>17</sup> The *klagende Herz* longs for recognition of the wisdom of its *Gesinnung* and due attention to the will. In this tale of the longings of the heart, we are missing beauty. If the will is steadily and honestly directed toward the good, then the understanding will apprehend the true. But don’t we need a place for the sense of beauty in this cultivation of the self? As we shall see, the absence of beauty will become a problem for Fichte.

Ultimately, solitary independence, which is the only way to find the path to truth, does link us to all other existence in the world. As we discover in Part I of Book Three, “Faith”: “[B]are pure being that does not concern me and that I would intuit just for the sake of intuition does not exist for me at all. Only through its relation to me does anything whatever exist for me. But everywhere only one relation to me is possible, and all others are only subspecies of this one: my vocation to act ethically” [*meine Bestimmung sittlich zu handeln*].<sup>18</sup> So, our independence leads us to communion with others and with the world. And our actions in the world define our relation with others. This brings us to practical reason.

It is faith in our own freedom and power in our own real activity that brings us to become who we are. As Fichte tells us, “We do not act because we know, but we know because we are meant to act; practical reason is the root of all reason” [*Wir handeln nicht, weil wir erkennen, sondern wir erkennen, weil wir zu handeln bestimmt sind; die praktische Vernunft ist die Wurzel*

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14. VM(LLA), 71–72/BM, 90.

15. VM(LLA), 72/BM, 90.

16. Ibid.

17. VM(LLA), 72/BM, 92.

18. VM(LLA), 77/BM, 97.

*aller Vernunft*].<sup>19</sup> Practical reason is the engine of change in the world, and, as we find in Part II of Book Three, longings and aspirations only make sense within the context of our power to change the world; indeed, Fichte speaks of “the absolute demand for a better world.”<sup>20</sup> Our vocation is an infinite task: it is ever in a process of becoming, not of completed being. As Fichte writes: “I simply cannot think of the present situation of mankind as the final permanent one and simply cannot think of it as mankind’s whole and final destiny.”<sup>21</sup> In all of its existential consequences, Fichte develops the point thus:

Am I to eat and drink only to get hungry and thirsty and eat and drink again, until the grave opened at my feet devours me and I myself have sprouted from the ground as food? Have I fathered beings like myself so that they too might eat and drink and die and leave behind beings like them who will do the same as I have already done? What is the purpose of this circle of ever returning into itself, of this game ever beginning anew in the same way, a game in which everything comes to be only to pass away, and passes away only to become already what it was? Why this monster that ceaselessly devours itself so that it can give birth to itself again and again, and gives birth to itself so that it can devour itself again?<sup>22</sup>

This dire scenario, this life as a tale told by an idiot, filled with sound and fury, signifying nothing, “can never be the destiny of my being and of all being” [*Nimmermehr kann dies die Bestimmung sein meines Seins, und alles Seins*].<sup>23</sup> There must be an abiding existence “in the changing world of transitory things.”<sup>24</sup> What is this abiding existence?

To give an answer to what this abiding existence must be like, we return again to the struggle between Nature and Freedom. “The sacrifices which the unruly violence of nature extorts from reason must at last exhaust, satiate, and appease that violence.”<sup>25</sup> The devastating Lisbon Earthquake of

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19. VM(LLA), 79/BM, 99.

20. VM(LLA), 81.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. VM(LLA), 81/BM, 102.

24. VM(LLA), 82.

25. VM(LLA), 82/BM, 103.

1755 was but one example of the “resistance of the wild mass against the lawful, life-giving, purposeful march of progress”<sup>26</sup> of which Fichte speaks. Such struggles can be soothed by cultivated lands that “shall animate and moderate the inert and hostile atmosphere of primeval forests, deserts, and swamps.”<sup>27</sup> One such cultivated response to the Lisbon Earthquake was the rise in prominence of the sublime as an aesthetic category. This aesthetic category was a tool that allowed us to present the violence of nature in an enriching way—transformations of the destructive forces into productive forces that shed light on the human condition. Yet, Fichte does not develop the aesthetic dimension of our relation to nature, and I think that this is a problem for his account of *Bestimmung*. The sublime *Bestimmung* of the human of which Fichte speaks is a level of cultivation in which the ethical and the aesthetic should meet. And shadows of the *schöne Seele* do emerge in Fichte’s text as he refers to the heavenly light that shines from every pure heart.<sup>28</sup> But the beautiful soul never emerges as a developed character in Fichte’s tale of *Bildung*, and that absence puzzles me. Fichte privileges scientific cultivation in his story of how we overcome the violence of nature, claiming that

[s]cience, first awakened by the pressure of need, shall later penetrate into the invariable laws of nature more thoughtfully and calmly, survey the whole power of this nature, and learn to calculate its possible developments. While remaining close to living and active nature and following in its footsteps, it shall conceive of a new nature. . . . In this way, nature is to become ever more transparent to us until we can see into its most secret core, and human power, enlightened and armed by its discoveries, shall control it without effort and peacefully maintain any conquest once it is made.<sup>29</sup>

Fichte equates progress for humanity with dominion over nature. And the domination over nature is strangely empirical, as if nature could be exhaustively grasped simply by the charts and graphs of the scientist. He seems to be “in the dark when it comes to anything that goes beyond charts

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26. VM(LLA), 82.

27. Ibid., 83.

28. Ibid., 94–95.

29. Ibid., 83.



and graphs.” Here, I am bringing in the voices of the author/s (Schelling, Hegel, and Hölderlin are all possible authors—Fichte is not) of 1796, *Das Älteste Systemprogramm/The Oldest Program for a System of German Idealism*, or what we can call a Romantic Manifesto. For some thinkers of the period, the highest act of reason is an aesthetic act. The philosopher must possess as much aesthetic power as the poet, for without aesthetic sense, one cannot understand ideas. So we might ask how well Fichte really understands the idea of freedom if he lacks aesthetic sense. And certainly, in his depiction of nature, no strong aesthetic sense emerges. His vision of our relation to nature is limited to a domination by a series of calculations, or to that which is quantifiable or measurable. But nature has meaning for us not only because of the destruction it causes or the empirical data we can gather from it, but also because of its beauty.

Fichte maintains too strong a divide between nature and freedom: “[It] is not nature, it is freedom itself that causes most of the disorders and the most terrible ones among humanity. Man’s most cruel enemy is man”<sup>30</sup> But man is, alas, not only a cruel enemy to man, but also to nonhuman Nature. Even the pope has addressed this problem in his recent encyclical. And now, perhaps with the impudent voice of Friedrich Schlegel whispering in my ear, we shall go to a text that has some uncanny affinities with the *Bestimmung* text, *Caritas in Veritate*. Schlegel would not have been surprised by these affinities, for he thought that Fichte sometimes had too much of a papal aura about him as he philosophized.<sup>31</sup>

In *Caritas in Veritate*, we are told that nature is at our disposal not as “a heap of scattered refuse,” but as the gift of the Creator who has given it an inbuilt order, enabling man to draw from it the principles needed in order “to till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15). The Creator gives Nature its order, but the human always has a privileged place. As we are told: “[I]t should also be stressed that it is contrary to authentic development to view nature as something more important than the human person” (Par. 48). (Forgetting that humans are above the rest of nature leads to neo-paganism or a new pantheism.) This claim about the importance of the human person vis-à-vis nature is one Fichte could have made. But the following warning is not Fichtean at all: “[It is] necessary to reject the . . . position, which aims at a total technical dominion over nature, because the natural envi-

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30. Ibid.

31. Schlegel, with his characteristic *Frechheit*, did liken Fichte to the pope, who, charged Schlegel, arbitrarily posits what he will, and so can easily explain everything; he, after all, has the key granting him “infallible power to open heaven and hell” (KFSA 18, 3, Nr. 2).

ronment is more than raw material to be manipulated at our pleasure; it is a wondrous work of the Creator containing a 'grammar' which sets forth ends and criteria for its wise use, not its reckless exploitation" (Par. 48). There is no Creator in Fichte's tale of Nature, no grammar setting forth ends and criteria for nature's wise use. There is human will and reason, and the development of science, which makes the laws of nature transparent to us and to enables us to have mastery over nature. Part of our *Bestimmung* or cultivation involves domination over nature:

The present world exists for us at all only through the commandment of duty. The other will likewise come to be for us only through another commandment of duty. For in no other way does a world exist for a rational being.

This, therefore, is my whole sublime vocation, my true being. I am a member of two orders. One purely spiritual, in which I exist through the bare pure will; and one sensible in which I act through my deed. The whole final purpose of reason is its own pure activity, simply through itself and without needing an instrument outside of itself, i.e., independence from everything which is not itself reason, absolutely unconditioned being.<sup>32</sup>

Only the improvement of the heart leads to true wisdom.<sup>33</sup> And as I mentioned at the outset, Fichte insists throughout the *Bestimmung* text that in love there is life and without it death and annihilation. He would have done well to keep in mind a point that Hannah Arendt raises in *Men in Dark Times* (1968), namely that the sense of beauty, or taste, is something with which we love the world.

## Conclusion

Now we return to Friedrich Schlegel and come back to the theme of the affinities between Fichte's *Bestimmung* and Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*. Schlegel was captivated, in particular, by Goethe's novel *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*; it represented for Schlegel the paragon of what art could accomplish, immortalized, in the company of the French Revolution and

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32. VM(LLA), 99.

33. Ibid., 103.

Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, as a tendency of the age. While Schlegel could only be partially supportive of the French Revolution (which collapsed all too soon into a Reign of Terror) and Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* (which had undesirable dogmatic, mystical aspects), he saw in Goethe's *Meister* a universal *Mischgattung*, a romantic model of what art could and should achieve.<sup>34</sup> And, if we replace the *Wissenschaftslehre* with the *Bestimmung* text, Goethe and Fichte meet again.

Early in the *Meister* essay, Schlegel tells us that in *Wilhelm Meister* "art will become science, and life an art."<sup>35</sup> Given that the theme of the unity of poetry, philosophy, and science shapes so much of Schlegel's work, if *Wilhelm Meister* is indeed a novel in which such unity is achieved, we begin to see why Schlegel would identify it as a tendency of the age, and further claim that an understanding of the work would reveal everything that was happening in literature. There is an important sense in which Schlegel's *Über Goethes Meister* provides us with an answer to a question posed in *Athenäum* Fragment Nr. 168, namely, "What philosophy is fittest for the poet?"<sup>36</sup> Schlegel begins to answer the question in the very same fragment where it is raised. As Schlegel tells us in *Athenäum* Fragment 168, the philosophy fittest for the poet is a philosophy of freedom:

[W]hat philosophy is left for the poet? The creative philosophy that originates in freedom and belief in freedom, and shows how the human spirit impresses its law on all things and how the world is its work of art.<sup>37</sup>

The creative philosophy sketched in this fragment is precisely the sort of system we find in Fichte's *Bestimmung* text. It is also the system that Schlegel found in Goethe's novel. But one can lament that in his search for freedom and a better world for human beings, Fichte showed such disre-

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34. Its only fault was that it was not obscene enough for Schlegel's taste. An exploration of this charge would take us too far afield—it is, among other things, an indication of how important provocation was to Schlegel.

35. The essay has been translated into English as *On Goethe's Meister*, appearing in *Classic and Romantic German Aesthetics*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003): 269–86 (hereafter, OM). I give the references to both the German original (KFSA 2, 126–46) and to the Cambridge translation (OM). KFSA 2, 128/OM, 271.

36. KFSA 2, 191–92/Firchow, 39.

37. KFSA 2, 191–92.

gard for the way in which an aesthetic approximation of nature could help us to order nature and cultivate it, for such an approximation is a balm against the domination and conquest of nature that has led to so much destruction. Fichte realized that in love there is life and without it death and annihilation: what he neglected to see was the power of the aesthetic as a way to love the world.



# Knowledge Teaches Us Nothing

## *The Vocation of Man* as Textual Initiation

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And yet nothing has been changed except what is  
Unreal, as if nothing had been changed at all.

—Wallace Stevens, “As you leave the room”

It is a widespread though not universal commonplace that *The Vocation of Man* aims to place its readers outside discursive knowledge. This is not so unusual an ambition for a work of classical German philosophy, yet it is hard to see how a mere text could achieve this goal. If discourse fails to convey the real, there is no use substituting new ideas or judgments for old ones. Nor can we indulge in anything like traditional theology, for that is nothing more than a system of judgments elaborated from something that nobody will admit is also a judgment. Something other than conventional philosophizing is needed—indeed, something unlike conventional writing as well.

What is more, Fichte suggests that once we pass beyond discourse we need do nothing but open our eyes and see.<sup>1</sup> But this, too, is problematic;

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1. VM(PW), 146–47; SW, II, 311. I have generally retained the phrasing of the original translator, William Smith.

as Georgia O'Keeffe said, really to see takes time. Fichte himself argues that what we take for appearances are not even appearances, they are ideas and judgments on appearances, our own desires and thoughts projected outside of ourselves. If the movement outside of discourse is to clarify our vision, then, it must bring about some form of self-transformation. This, too, is notoriously difficult to pull off by means of a text.

Fichte was always concerned with pedagogical method, and the project of *The Vocation of Man* might best be viewed as a self-conscious response to these two connected problems. His own situation likely called for such a response; he was writing in the wake of the atheism dispute, when his customary and not unjustifiable belief that he was being misunderstood was surely at its most intense. This alone would suggest the need for a new form of presentation—a kinder, gentler attempt to force the reader to understand.

Whatever the motivation, the rhetorical structure of *the Vocation of Man* as much as its content shows a deep engagement with the problems of bringing readers beyond the text they are reading, orienting them to the very different expectations proper to that stance, and spurring the self-transformation that makes the passage one of genuine illumination. The text thus does not so much set out the position beyond discourse as it enacts the movement to that position (or, rather, that non-position). Fichte was always insistent that the only way to understand the *Wissenschaftslehre* was to reproduce its fundamental acts for oneself. In *The Vocation of Man*, though, the text itself is performative. The readers' identification with the narrator/hero induces the experiences that Fichte wants them to undergo.

The very format of the book suggests that something other than discourse is afoot. Not unlike many other cultural productions of its revolutionary epoch, it is an essay in mixed genres, part tract, part monologue, and part closet drama.<sup>2</sup> Charles Rosen claims that “[t]he mixed genre in the eighteenth century is a sign of indecorum,”<sup>3</sup> and though one could hardly consider *The Vocation of Man* to be indecorous, it is at least unsettling. Its opening sections are calculated to overturn readers' expectations and cast doubt on the very subjects that they purport to address. One turns to a philosophical text for illumination, but for much of *The Vocation of Man* Fichte appears determined to plunge his readers farther into darkness.

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2. Examples are the “*dramma giocosa*” *Don Giovanni*, the synthesis of low and high art in *Die Zauberflöte*, Tieck's play which runs backward, the constant self-referentiality of Byron's *Don Juan*, and—later on—the apparently random interweaving of stories from different genres and milieus in Hoffman's *Kater Murr*.

3. Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven*, 2d. ed. (New York, W. W. Norton, 2009), 322.

There is nothing similar to this in the academic presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. But Fichte's method here does the same work as the painstaking analysis of the substructures of self-consciousness found in those texts; for the aim of Fichte's interrogation of self-consciousness is not knowledge in itself but the understanding that the self is an activity instead of an object. Only after we grasp how thoroughly experience is permeated and transformed by our own activity can our genuine relationship with the real emerge.<sup>4</sup> Fichte assumed—perhaps too confidently—that the logic of his more formal works would carry philosophically inclined readers and students to this shift in standpoints. He could make no such assumption with a lay audience, and he therefore crafted an interior drama to replace it. In this he was perhaps too successful; the transformative intentions of *The Vocation of Man* have often been taken to mark a departure from Fichte's other Jena-period works instead of showing those works in a new light.

Although *The Vocation of Man* does not try to convince us to accept a new, improved set of ideas about the world, charting its structure and sense still requires some exegesis. As Fichte tells us at the outset, our hero (I shall refer to him as male for convenience only) is a surrogate for the reader. As good Enlightened readers would do themselves, the protagonist first tries to find his vocation by the application of rational knowledge. In Part One he takes the route of the physical sciences and starts from the apparent objectivity of the external world. All too soon, though, he finds himself trapped in a soulless cosmos of absolute determinism.

A wondrous Spirit then manifests itself at the outset of Part Two. It seems reasonable to expect something better from this source, especially because the first part is titled "Doubt" and the second "Knowledge." Like the protagonist, the reader surely expects that this promised knowledge will clear away the shadows with which the first part ended. Better yet, that Spirit is something of a philosopher. It is well versed in the theoretical side of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and the foundations of transcendental philosophy. Its teaching has been taken as a summary of Fichte's own thought, as a parody of the way it was read by his contemporaries, and as the purely critical aspect of the *Wissenschaftslehre* presented in isolation, but it is clearly teaching, and our surrogate is eager to learn.

However its lessons are interpreted, though, the Spirit clearly has no intention of fulfilling the protagonist's expectations. The upshot of the dialogue is just the opposite of what our hero hopes. Knowledge is not just incapable of explaining or justifying human freedom and dignity, it turns

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4. Hegel's *Phenomenology* has similar aims, of course.



out to be completely useless as a way of disclosing reality itself. Objective and subjective routes both end in aporias. All the Spirit can show the protagonist is that he is trapped in a solipsist's nightmare, surrounded by his own self-generated images and out of touch with any reality beyond. We and our surrogate had turned in hope to the Spirit only to find our hopes betrayed. Knowledge, it turns out, teaches us nothing.<sup>5</sup>

This is a demonstration of more than theoretical force, because Fichte's protagonist lays great stress on making verifiable contact with the real. Yet every path offered by theoretical reason has been shown to be a dead end. The only reason he is not compelled to accept the soulless cosmos as real is that the real is not available to him at all.

The narrow scope of theoretical reason is an idealist theme from Kant through late Schelling, but in Fichte's dramatic presentation it leads to a full-blown existential crisis. Naïvely unaware of his own ignorance, the protagonist had set off to acquire correct knowledge only to discover that he possessed an utter lack of knowledge. The destruction of his confidence thus brings him into a zone of liminality, to borrow a phrase from Victor Turner's celebrated analysis of rituals of passage:

The first phase [of an initiation ritual] . . . comprises symbolic behavior signifying the detachment of the individual or group either from an earlier fixed point in the social structure, from a set of cultural conditions . . . or from both. During the intervening "liminal" period, the characteristics of the ritual subject . . . are ambiguous; he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state. . . . [L]iminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon. . . . [A]s liminal beings they have no status, property, rank or role, position in a kinship system. . . . It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life.<sup>6</sup>

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5. The relation of this section to the *Wissenschaftslehre* as a whole is well analyzed in Ives Radrizzani, "The Place of *The Vocation of Man* in Fichte's Work," in *New Essays on Fichte's Later Jena Wissenschaftslehre*, ed. Breazeale and Rockmore (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 317–44, esp. 321–26.

6. Victor Turner, "Liminality and Communitas," *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1977), 94–95.

It may seem a stretch to go from the men's house in a New Guinea village to Fichte's study in Jena, but the protagonist in *The Vocation of Man* finds himself just as bereft of a place in the world and a role to play as any ritual subject. When he cannot count on the coherence and validity of his reasoning, he, and we as readers, are as lost within the wilderness of experience as is any tribal adolescent left alone, naked, and weaponless in the bush.

The inversions and reversals of liminality will fill the rest of *The Vocation of Man*. It is only when the hero renounces his dependence on knowledge that he comes to know, only when he recognizes his blindness that he can see "something that is greater and higher than all knowledge, and that contains within itself the end and object of all knowledge."<sup>7</sup> But though Fichte gives Part Three of the text the title "Faith," he rests his argument on no articles of belief. The practice of most theology is to take a "something beyond knowledge" as the rock on which to build a philosophy, developing a system logically deduced from this one bit of data. This could not be Fichte's course. His "something beyond knowledge" is intentional action, a "something" of which a presence to knowledge is only one aspect and which cannot be reduced to knowledge without betrayal. Indeed, its uncanny nature functions to upend or undo discursive knowledge itself. It is not so much a grounding point as the root of an unfocus, the yeast hidden within experience which can leaven it all.<sup>8</sup>

This brings us to something else unusual about our text. Little else in Fichte's work touches on so many subjects, including the environment, natural science, anthropology, politics, religion, and epistemology; yet for all its breadth *The Vocation of Man* never moves from its original insight that "[t]here is within me an impulse to absolute, independent self-activity."<sup>9</sup> As Fichte writes, "Here . . . is the point at which consciousness connects itself with reality."<sup>10</sup> This, of course, is as essential a Fichtean point as one could imagine; the *Wissenschaftslehre* grows from the mutual implication of self-conscious agency and the reality of the external world. It is also the initiatory secret, as it were, but it is barely understood at first. Fichte has to return to it over and over, each time to confound the protagonist's

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7. VM(PW), 84; SW, II, 249.

8. I do not interpret Fichte in a way that justifies Hölderlin's strictures in "Urteyl und Sein"; it seems to me that he was fully aware of this issue but was unable to counter what had become the universal misapprehension of what the *Wissenschaftslehre* was all about.

9. VM(PW), 84; SW, II, 249.

10. VM(PW), 86; SW, II, 251.

expectations and deepen his experience until at last it is truly understood and the hero himself embodies not knowledge but “the end and object of all knowledge.” Part Three of *The Vocation of Man* is not linear discourse but a static, cyclical structure that repeatedly brings the narrator back to his original insight until he can see what was always already contained within it.

First, though, Fichte must lay to rest the endless regress of skepticism. In so doing he shows the reader, perhaps a bit of a skeptic herself, that the perceptions and experiences of ordinary life rest on nothing more secure than a belief in our agency and thus in a realm of external objects in which that agency is efficacious. Our life rests on faith; “not knowledge, but a resolution of the will to admit the validity of knowledge.”<sup>11</sup> And with that concern allayed, Fichte turns to the implications of that faith. Let us accept the reality of this impulse to pure self-activity; where does that take us?

Agency gives our hero confidence in his own being as a self and in a real world in which he can act, but agency implies free choice, and free choice brings with it the question of which acts he ought to perform. The answer to this question appears after a second encounter with the impulse, now appearing with an object and thus as a drive. It is met up with as the conscience—the immediate manifestation of the drive as the moral law. What looked at first like an impulse to action in general is now seen to point to specific actions. Yet these are only the universalizable, selfless actions dictated by the Kantian imperatives. Paradoxically, the protagonist’s one secure point of self-knowledge and self-definition turns out to be an inner drive that disregards his own empirical situation and every one of his biological drives.

The drive also shows the narrator the existence of other free beings like himself. This is still a Kantian position—the moral law is prior to our recognition of others as free beings, after all—but Kantian or not it is yet another of the many inversions in the text. We do not deduce the reality of other free beings by a rational process and then accord them rights. The feeling of inviolability with which the moral law cloaks them and their acts *shows* us that they are free beings and *compels* us to grant them rights. This is an article neither of faith or of knowledge; the reality of other minds simply manifests itself to us. It is something seen rather than something decided.

But the moral law gives us the external world, too. Even the objects of our immediate interest, such as food and drink, are given by the duty to

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11. VM(PW), 89; SW, II, 253–54.

maintain ourselves in good health. Fichte reinforces his point by a discussion of the implicit moral order of the world which underlies the actions of even the pure egoist:

[E]ven for him, his sensuous world, and his belief in its reality, arises in no other manner than from his ideas of a moral world. If he does not apprehend it by the thought of his duties, he certainly does so by the demand for his rights. . . . Even should he never propose to himself any other purpose in his use and enjoyment of surrounding objects but simply that of enjoying them, he at least demands this enjoyment as a right, in the possession of which he claims to be left undisturbed by others; and thus he apprehends even the irrational world of sense by means of a moral idea.<sup>12</sup>

If we were nothing but natural beings we would not have a world. It is because we direct ourselves to the objects of natural desire that the mere unconscious environment becomes a defined realm of action. What is more, to act is to claim the right to act, so no act can evade moral questions, however remote they may appear. It is in this sense that the entire world consists of the sphere of our duties. It is not that the world is so ordered to form a kind of parcours for ethical calisthenics, but that people and objects become real to us only by our interest in them, and our interests always implicate the drive to absolute self-activity and the moral law.

The next return to the drive for self-activity features in Fichte's famous, or infamous, depiction of the rationalization of nature and the unification of humanity,<sup>13</sup> a vision that João da Ega in Eça de Queirós's masterpiece *The Maias* imagined as "a vast city covering the whole globe, made up entirely of houses and of stone, with here and there a small sacred grove planted with rosebushes, where people could go and pick posies to perfume the altar of Justice."<sup>14</sup> Our protagonist, though, is not to dream

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12. VM(PW), 97; SW, II, 262.

13. Here, too, Fichte draws out what can be seen as a Kantian argument, that humanity "is the chief instrument for instituting order and harmony in irrational nature" (KU, AA 5, 431; trans. J. C. Meredith as *Kant's Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), vol. 2, 95, and a commonplace of the time; see, e.g., the miner's discussion of "the gradual calming of nature" in Novalis, *Henry van Ofterdingen*, trans. Palmer Hilty (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1990), 87–88.

14. João Maria Eça de Queirós, *The Maias*, trans. Margaret Jull Costa (New York, New Directions, 2007), 378.

such a perfect world and then make it a reality. He is not to pose ethical ends and then adopt means to achieve them. The only proper course runs in the opposite direction. Duties give rise to ends; the perfected world is defined by the specific contents of our duty, not the other way around.

This Fichtean inversion is so important that he fairly ties himself in knots in an effort to make it clear:

[T]his purpose or end of my action must not be proposed to me for its own sake,—perhaps through some necessity of Nature,—and my course of action be then determined according to this end; I must not have an end assigned to me, and then inquire how I must act in order to attain this end; my action must not be dependent on the end: I must act in a certain manner, simply because I ought so to act;—this is the first point. . . . []Just as I do not hunger because food is before me but a thing becomes food for me because I hunger, so I do not act as I do because a certain end is to be attained, but the end becomes an end to me because I am bound to act in the manner by which it may be attained. . . . The end does not determine the commandment; but, on the contrary, the immediate purport of the commandment determines the end.<sup>15</sup>

There is more, but I think that this is enough to make the point.

Such a reversal of cause and effect is absolutely necessary. Knowledge gives us no reliable goals. It is a mere parade of representations, and if we attach ourselves to a representation as an end we pursue nothing more than an unacknowledged product of inclination. Nor can we establish ends rationally. Attempts to construct rational moral ends rest on a misleading identification of reason with logical discourse instead of, in Dieter Henrich's words, "a rationality that, without a fundamental orientation towards the contents of the world or toward eternally fixed, given rules, spontaneously generates ways of organizing thought and the dynamics of rational life."<sup>16</sup> We can rely only on the successive promptings of conscience, which is the

15. VM(PW), 99–100; SW, II, 264–65.

16. Dieter Henrich, "The French Revolution and German Philosophy," trans. W. Martin and S. Bernecker, in *Aesthetic Judgment and the Moral Image of the World: Studies in Kant* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), 91.

movement of that rationality within us, and perform the specific tasks that these lead us to undertake.<sup>17</sup>

It will be noted that in spite of the apparent emptiness of the moral law Fichte does have a determinate end in view, the progressive amelioration of the human condition. Yet this goal comes directly from the form of the moral law; as far as content goes it is as empty as the law itself. The moral law is a drive to action and therefore to change, and for this reason it cannot lead to stasis. It must bring us to a different world, if not to a better one. But it is also a drive that serves none of our own interests as empirical individuals. Its aims must be universal ones, and in human terms it therefore moves always in the direction of a more open and more egalitarian world.

Fichte's political and social vision, then, is not contradicted by his repudiation of grounded rational ends. It is one of the fracture points in the text all the same, however, because he relies on two inconsistent grounds to support it. The first is historically specific: the state of humanity at the close of the eighteenth century is intolerable. He writes,

I cast a glance on the present relations of men towards each other and towards Nature; on the feebleness of their powers, on the strength of their desires and passions. A voice within me proclaims with irresistible conviction—"It is impossible that it can remain thus; it must become other and better."<sup>18</sup>

In the next paragraph but one, however, Fichte's narrator lets the empirical miseries of humanity slip to one side and rails against the existential purposelessness of a world without progress, one limited to "birth, copulation, and death."<sup>19</sup>

The earthly utopia "is the purpose of our earthly life."<sup>20</sup> But this is where the tension in the text explodes, ironically because here, at least, Fichte is both confident of its accomplishment<sup>21</sup> and certain that bringing

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17. Just as the Kantian limitation of theoretical reason lies behind the shift in registers from the first two parts to the third, so does Kant's dismissal of heteronomous morality loom behind Fichte's argument here.

18. VM(PW), 100–101; SW, II, 265.

19. T. S. Eliot, "Sweeney Agonistes."

20. VM(PW), 113; SW, II, 278.

21. VM(PW), 114; SW, II, 278.

it to pass will be an ethical disaster. The radiant future offers nothing but endless cycles of now sanitized birth, properly regulated copulation, and dignified death. If the moral law is limited to earthly ends there will come a time when there is nothing left to change. And if there is nothing to change there is no world; no striving, no object.<sup>22</sup>

Fichte's protagonist is thus led once again to his starting point, to examine the moral law within himself yet once more. Once more its inner movement changes his orientation toward the world. Fichte asks in effect if we have not mistaken the purpose the drive to self-activity sets for us. It seemed on the last go-round to direct us toward social goals, and while those goals are desirable and attainable, they no longer appear as the end stipulated by that drive; they are, at best, a necessary but partial fulfillment.

This dialectical upending of expectations was necessary, a kind of Fichtean cunning of reason. Humanity has to pursue social justice not just for itself but to discover that the ends of the moral law do not lie in the earthly sphere. It is through such inward transformations worked by his openness to the drive that the protagonist, a literal incarnation of the moral law, moves toward Fichte's highest synthesis, that of the sensual and supersensual worlds.

First, however, the supersensual world itself has to be grounded just as the phenomenal world had been, and Fichte does this with a presupposition and a parallel. The presupposition is that in spite of our limited powers and fallibility the moral law does not command in vain. This is not an arbitrary assumption, however, but a necessary implication of our own experience; we could not feel obligated otherwise. With this granted, the parallel falls a little more easily into place.<sup>23</sup> The reality of the physical world is a concomitant of our claim to physical agency, and in just the same way the reality of the supersensual world is a concomitant of our claim to moral agency. To be a physical agent is to have a real world in which that

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22. Fichte is often said to posit social goals as infinite ends and human history as infinite striving for unattainable ends, but such a reading appears inconsistent with the present text.

23. If nobody gets any benefit from moral action, not even ourselves, why would we bother? How would it even be the right thing? If being good had no result at all, following the moral law would be no different from any other discipline such as mountain climbing or long-distance bicycle racing. There is nothing "better" about our moral acts, and the moral law would not have the force of a command unless our self-discipline bore some kind of fruit. However, this is not to say that the obligatory force of the good depends on its consequences; rather, to place oneself under the moral law is to find oneself in a world where that law must be held efficacious. This is a more modest postulate than any of Kant's.

agency is effective. To be a moral agent is to have a morally ordered world in which one's ethical intentions are similarly effective. Because we have so little power to effectuate change in the physical world, these intentions have to live in another, supersensual world.

Fichte's language suggests that this commitment to the reality of the supersensual is neither arrived at through reason nor deduced from prior principles. It is simply seen. It is recognized once the protagonist relinquishes the notion that the moral law must find its ends in the world of sense. At that moment, "[t]he mist of delusion clears away from before my sight! I receive a new organ, and a new world opens before me. . . . [T]he Eternal World rises before me more brightly, and the fundamental law of its order stands clearly and distinctly apparent to my mental vision."<sup>24</sup> The performative nature of the text is nowhere more obvious than it is here.

As the quote reveals, what also makes itself manifest at the start of the fourth and final section of Part Three is the framework of the supersensual world itself. What this framework is, though, is unfortunately far from clear. Fichte writes:

[M]y will, absolutely by itself . . . [must] act in a perfectly congenial sphere,—reason upon reason, spirit upon spirit,—in a sphere to which nevertheless it does not give the law of life, activity, and progress, but which has that law in itself;—therefore upon self-active reason. But self-active reason is will. The law of the super-sensual world must, therefore, be a Will:—A Will which operates purely as will; by itself, and absolutely without any instrument or sensible material of its activity; which is at the same time both act and product.<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps one way of reconstructing this argument is as follows: if my will is to be efficacious in a supersensual world—that is, if the mere intentional content of my activity must bear fruit—then the law of that world must itself concern intentions and not acts. My intention has to affect or be integrated into something wherein intentionality is both act and product, and which has causality in the physical world. The law of the supersensual world is thus a supraindividual will whose willing effortlessly realizes itself.

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24. VM(PW), 116, 118; SW, II, 281–82.

25. VM(PW), 133; SW, II, 297.



It is essentially self-manifestation—it manifests itself, in Henrich’s words, simply in the form of that which manifests itself.<sup>26</sup>

This will is completely free, as there is nothing outside of it which could constrain or direct it. Fichte therefore claims that in it “the instinctive demand of reason for absolute freedom and independence is realized”<sup>27</sup> The price of this realization, of course, is the belief in individual agency and independence, which secures human confidence in the physical world. That agency, however, is not abolished but transformed—sublated, if you will—because this infinite will and individual intentionality are reciprocally related.

The experience of agency with which Fichte begins is not wrong in itself. What the protagonist unlearns is his individual claim to agency. His free actions are not his alone; instead, they are the activity of the infinite will within him. But that will is nothing alien. It carries forward the product of his own ethical intentions just as it shapes his intentionality, and the magic of this reciprocal activity thus binds together all free beings. This is the practical root of the universality of the moral law. The drive to self-activity does not merely command those actions that treat all free beings as ends; it encompasses the totality of their ethical intentions.

This is perhaps the profoundest reversal of the entire text, a veritable Copernican Revolution of Fichte’s own. Fichte is quite right to claim that the emotional, intentional, and even discursive harmony among individuals is “a mystery which already lies clearly before every eye in the present life, without attracting the notice of anyone or being regarded as in any way wonderful.”<sup>28</sup> We are used to figuring social life at the peripheries of experience and placing selfhood and individuality at the center, and we imagine that we negotiate our commerce with the world through a discursive or quasi-discursive grasp of our own physical constraints and others’ presumed interests and actions. But Fichte has strong reasons for claiming that the “mutual recognition and reciprocal action of free beings in this world, is perfectly inexplicable by the laws of nature or of thought.”<sup>29</sup> We live in each other more intimately than we can ever know or justify.

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26. Dieter Henrich, “Fichte’s original insight,” trans. D. R. Lachterman, in *Contemporary German Philosophy I* (1982): 42.

27. VM(PW), 133; SW, II, 297.

28. VM(PW), 135; SW, II, 299.

29. VM(PW), 137; SW, II, 301. There is an increasing body of research suggesting naturalistic vectors such as the mirror neuron system for such embodied knowledge.

When Fichte's protagonist finally recognizes that he is not separate from the process of the infinite will, he himself is transformed. What he thought was a characteristic of himself as a uniquely self-conscious creature comes to be seen as the property of a totality in which being and consciousness are one. What appeared before him as an independent world, present only as it answered to his drives, is now seen impartially, as God sees it—exactly as it is, and identical in all of its details with his own real nature.

At the close of the work, then, Fichte's hero passes into Turner's phase of "reaggregation," the return to life with the initiate's perception now transformed. Identifying himself with the drive to self-activity releases him from the things of this world, and our protagonist's eyes open to the plain sense of things in which the visible glows with the radiance of the supersensual activity that is its reality. Only one drive now stipulates the world, the drive to self-activity, which is the activity of the infinite will, and the world seen through that drive is the world *sub specie aeterni*.

As Fichte has already argued, the world exists for us only as an image of our desires; water is present because of our thirst or dirtiness, gold because of our lust for prestige or power. Our eyes are normally too blinded by need for us to see even appearances, and these are further befogged by the sense that the proper object of knowledge lies behind them. The only drive that reveals appearances themselves is the impersonal and universal drive to self-activity. Fichte's hero reaches his goal when he surrenders everything but that drive, which, unlike the empirical drives, stipulates the world as it is. This act unites him with the rest of the world and frees him from the illusion that there is anything more or anything to be known. Paradoxically, really to see appearances is to stand within the real.

Fichte writes, "No longer through my heart, *but by my eye alone*, do I apprehend outward objects and am connected with them; and *this eye itself is purified by freedom*, and looks through error and deformity to the True and Beautiful."<sup>30</sup> The very world that had led the protagonist to despair and self-doubt now is seen as "self-forming, self-manifesting Will . . . clothed . . . with manifold sensible forms, [which] flows forth through me, and throughout the immeasurable universe of Nature. . . . Through that which to others seems a mere dead mass, my eye beholds this eternal life and movement in every vein of sensible and spiritual Nature."<sup>31</sup> The proliferation of visual metaphors is both striking and telling.

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30. VM(PW), 147; SW, II, 311. The parallels between this entire process and spiritual practice in the Indian (Hindu/Buddhist) traditions is most striking but cannot be raised in the present context.

31. VM(PW), 151–52; SW, II, 315–17.

And yet for all of these reversals nothing has changed except our hero's thoughts. His orientation to the world is different in every cycle of the text progresses, each time because the drive to self-activity destroys the conceits of knowledge one by one. In the end it frees him from the illusion that he stands apart from the reality he sought. It dispels the illusion that separates self and world. As this implies, though, self and world have never been anything but identical and we have never been apart from the divine.

The standard caricature of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is that it is a solipsistic idealism for which the world is nothing but a projection of the Ego. We can see now that it moves in just the opposite direction. The drives manifest themselves out of the ultimate unity of self and world, and the unity of the disparate natural drives with the drive to self-activity implies a deeply embodied approach in which the ethical stance transforms not the maxims for action but the experience of agency itself. Fichte's subject is neither trapped nor confined to the mind.

Nor could anything be less Fichtean than another persistent claim, the idea that Fichte's nature is a dead realm that is of value only as an obstacle course in the moral progress of the self. This is true only in the preliminary stage in our hero's progress, when nature itself is constituted as an object in opposition to the active subject and is perceived only insofar as it answers to the subject's empirical needs. Schelling never grasped this point, though Fichte repeatedly tried to explain it to him.<sup>32</sup> And the equally common idea that Fichte's striving condemns us to an infinity of effort toward an unattainable goal is also mistaken. The Fichtean insight is not either/or but both/and. His goal is as perpetually consummated as it is unreachable. The world is the simultaneous alienation and self-expression of the eternal will, and the mortal existence of the individual is the life of the divine. There is everything to do and nothing to accomplish; as our hero concludes, "[T]hus am I unchangeable, firm, and completed for all Eternity."<sup>33</sup> In yet another reversal, infinite movement is absolute stillness and striving itself is infinite fulfillment.

Here, too, what has been taken for an absolute idealism can more accurately be read as a philosophy of embodiment. If the world is the self-manifestation of the divine, the divine must be present in the world *as the world*. The world does not exhaust or define the divine will, which can never be known as itself. Yet this will cannot be reified as an entity

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32. See, e.g., Fichte's letter of December 27, 1800, in Johan Schulte-Sasse, ed., *Theory as Practice: A Critical Anthology of Early German Romantic Writings* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 79–80.

possessing a higher degree of reality concealed behind appearances. The world is only the image of the divine, but the image is the only possible manifestation of that will and it is thus reality in all its fullness. Humanity is created in the divine image, but the ultimate truth of that relationship is that we live God's life on earth in and through our bodies. Embodied life is the life of the spirit; there is no other way that spirit can live.

Is this the end of Fichte the rational philosopher and the switch to a new and uncomfortably metaphysical position? I do not believe that it is or that one can draw a neat division between Jena and post-Jena Fichtes. Even at the close of *The Vocation of Man*, Fichte goes no farther than a single ontological presupposition, the ultimate unity of the explanandum which is justified in circular fashion by the explanation that it makes possible.<sup>34</sup> He is indeed concerned with ontology rather than epistemology, but as Markus Gabriel and Slavoj Žižek have recently argued, his ontological position is the exact opposite—or inversion—of the belief in a transcendent reality hidden behind the world of our experience:

Like Hegel, the later Fichte and Schelling ultimately locate the necessary displacement of truth, the necessity of error, in the noumenal itself. In other words, the relative occurs within the absolute. The absolute is not distinguished from its contingent manifestations. It loses the status of a substance underlying the illusory appearances and becomes the movement of a self-othering without which the illusion of a substance could not take place.<sup>35</sup>

Fichte wants us to think this self-othering coherently, and we cannot do this discursively, in transcendent terms or otherwise. He is neither ideally consistent nor clear on this point, but the thrust of Fichte's argument is always against any separation between the actual and the real. In this context, all transcendent claims are signs of failure.<sup>36</sup>

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33. VM(PW), 154; SW, II, 319.

34. This unity includes the unity of thinking and being, and if that marks Fichte off as a metaphysician then a metaphysician he is. But it asserts nothing about a transcendent sphere over and against the world of our experience.

35. M. Gabriel and S. Žižek, *Mythology, Madness, and Laughter: Subjectivity in German Idealism* (New York, Continuum, 2009), 2–3.

36. Žižek correctly notes Fichte's tendency to cling to an individual subject, however inconsistent this may be with the structure of his own thought; see Slavoj Žižek, "Fichte's Laughter," in Gabriel and Žižek, op.cit., 124.

Fichte's final reversal is that it is not his purified vision but everyday experience that rests on the illusion of transcendence. His absolute, like his Ego, is activity without extrinsic content; rather, its content is its activity. All talk about it can only leave something outside; indeed, all talk only constitutes the inside of knowledge along with the excluded other, the detached observer gazing on the real world and seeking its transcendent ghost. The infinite will does not occupy a transcendent sphere, and if it hides it does so in plain sight. We cannot recognize ourselves and our world as its self-manifestation until we walk away from the imaginary non-place of thinking, but with that move self and world appear in truth and the phantom of transcendence vanishes like smoke.<sup>37</sup> Žižek's recent and most welcome paper on Fichte's laughter points to Fichte's frequent ambivalence on this point, but it seems to me that the movement of the present text makes most sense as a demonstration that it is our "organization of appearances [itself] that evokes the mirage that there is hidden behind it an Absolute."<sup>38</sup> This includes the stance of knowledge itself, which claims an imaginary perspective point in front of experience and thus projects an equally imaginary reality behind it. The initiatory secret is, in a sense, that there are no secrets. The real is the actual; the world of our experience is the Absolute as it makes itself knowable to itself, and our vocation is to live without the illusion that there is a bigger or better Absolute to be sought out.<sup>39</sup>

The Hegelian parallels are obvious, and Fichte would surely have agreed with Hegel's famous comment that "the consummation of the infinite End . . . consists merely in removing the illusion which makes it seem yet unaccomplished."<sup>40</sup> In its own way, too, the *Phenomenology* is as performative and initiatory as Fichte's text. But Hegel could not accept Fichte's shift in registers to the direct apprehension of reality and claimed that Fichte's Kantian insistence on the limited scope of knowledge merely

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37. The assumptions of individual agency and freedom are transcendent claims, which is why Fichte had always considered them as ideas that we are compelled to assume, rather than as ontological truths. At the close of the text, however, the protagonist has set aside these beliefs, and agency and freedom are recognized as the activity of the totality itself.

38. Žižek, "Fichte's Laughter," 126.

39. On this see Michael Vater, "Fichte's Reaction to Schelling's Identity Philosophy in 1806," in *After Jena: New Essays on Fichte's Later Philosophy*, ed. Breazeale and Rockmore (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 81–90, 83.

40. G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Logic, being Part One of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, trans. W. Wallace (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1973 [orig. pub. 1873]), § 212, 274.

constituted the Absolute as an Other and condemned him to a philosophy of reflection instead of a true speculative philosophy. In his response to *The Vocation of Man*, the 1802 essay *Faith and Knowledge*, he calls for

the absolute Passion, the speculative Good Friday in place of the historic Good Friday. Good Friday must be speculatively re-established in the whole truth and harshness of its God-for-sakenness. . . . [T]he highest totality can and must achieve its resurrection solely from this harsh consciousness of loss, encompassing everything, and ascending in all its earnestness and out of its deepest ground to the most serene freedom of its shape.<sup>41</sup>

The speculative Good Friday demands, of course, the speculative Easter Sunday. In broadest terms this is the whole structure of Hegel's work; the *Phenomenology* is the Passion and the system itself is the resurrection, in which knowledge, having crucified itself on its own negativity, ascends to its own right hand in conscious possession of absolute knowing.

In our more chastened times, though, Fichte's silence has had its own appeal. One could enjoyably gloss parts of *The Vocation of Man* with select passages from Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. The two share very similar aims,<sup>42</sup> and in the light of the present text, in fact, we might propose that the entire *Wissenschaftslehre* is elucidatory in the way that the propositions of the *Tractatus* are: "[H]e who understands me finally recognizes them as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it)."<sup>43</sup>

Note, though, Wittgenstein's uncharacteristically wordy description of the work demanded: not rejecting his words but climbing out through them, on them, over them. The complexity and rigor of these two philosophers' works is demanded because of the deep roots that knowledge has put down

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41. G. W. F. Hegel, *Faith and knowledge*, trans. W. Cerf and H. S. Harris (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977), 191.

42. Wittgenstein, admittedly, argued that philosophy leaves everything as it is (*Philosophical Investigations* § 124), and Fichte has a well-deserved reputation as a social activist; but the *Wissenschaftslehre* itself does not reveal what should be; it shows only the need to act. In parallel with Wittgenstein's remark one might put Fichte's many statements to the effect that his intention was merely to explain the genesis of the ordinary standpoint of knowledge.

43. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, trans. C. K. Ogden (London, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1922), § 6:54. It should be obvious that I follow the "mysterian" view of the *Tractatus*.

in our being and our perceptions. Anything other than an exhaustive grasp of the twists and turns through which we construct our everyday world will leave reality obscured. Thus, Wittgenstein is led to the details of logical analysis and, later, into the vagaries of language itself, and Fichte must take himself and his readers through the profoundest structural details of the making of the self and its world.

This is what effects the initiatory transformation at the crisis point of *The Vocation of Man*. We must see how everything is constituted so that everything can be called into question. Our whole world must collapse, leaving us nowhere at all to stand. Only that will free us so that, after the long process that Fichte sets out in the rest of the work, we become able to perform the apparently simple act of seeing things as they really are. Here, too, it may be helpful to quote Wittgenstein, whose own philosophy also harks back to the *docta ignorantia* of Cusanus and Eckhart: "The solution of the problem of life is seen in the vanishing of the problem. (Is not this the reason why those who have found after a long period of doubt that the sense of life became clear to them have then been unable to say what constituted that sense?)." <sup>44</sup>

But if Wittgenstein looks toward Fichte, Fichte looks back much farther, to the very roots of the Western philosophical tradition. As Pierre Hadot and others have shown, <sup>45</sup> philosophy in the classical age was a form of spiritual discipline, not primarily an intellectual pursuit, and the echoes of Plotinian and post-Plotinian Neoplatonism in idealist writings are often noted. It is worth adding here that at least one contemporary scholar has argued that Neoplatonic texts, like Fichte's, are

texts which are at odds with their own textuality, discourses that deny that anything has been asserted, and discursive strategies that set themselves against their very discursivity. <sup>46</sup>

She adds,

Neoplatonists shared the belief that wisdom could not be expressed or transmitted by rational thought or language[,] . . . the doctrine that intellect is its objects, and the self-disclosing nature

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44. Ibid., 6.521.

45. See, e.g., Pierre Hadot, *What Is Ancient Philosophy?* trans. M. Chase (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002); Paul Zanker, *The Mask of Socrates: The Image of the Intellectual in Antiquity*, trans. A. Shapiro (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

46. Sara Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism: Non-discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), Ix–xiv.

of intellectual activity. . . . But what kind of language can be used to convey the truth that this faculty grasps?<sup>47</sup>

One answer, for both Fichte and the philosophers of late antiquity, is language that is essentially performative.

With certain exceptions, though, the Neoplatonists held to a mind-body dualism and a theory of emanations that distanced the phenomenal world from the real in ways alien to Fichte's fundamentally embodied stance. There is a better and deeper parallel at the very beginning of Western philosophy, in the nondualistic and explicitly initiatory wisdom tradition that predated Socrates and found expression in Parmenides, Empedocles, and the Pythagoreans.

The poem of Parmenides speaks from that current with particular clarity and force, and Parmenides's intentions are strikingly close to Fichte's. Chiara Robbiano argues that "Parmenides offers his audience a 'mental journey' whereby 'one who understands Being becomes Being.'"<sup>48</sup> This description could be applied with equal justice to *The Vocation of Man*. Parmenides's teaching is similarly performative and transformational, not discursive. Lisa Atwood Wilkinson connects his poem with the practice of sung speech shared by epic poets and lawgivers; in her words, "Unlike, perhaps, ordinary or instrumental speech, logos or genuine [sung] speech 'makes manifest what it is talking about' or in Heidegger's later terminology, logos brings what it is talking about—*ousia*—to presence."<sup>49</sup>

The initiatory movement of Fichte's text, too, is paralleled by the actual initiatory practice out of which Parmenides's poem comes. Parmenides's contemporaries would have recognized that source just from his calling himself "the man who knows,"<sup>50</sup> and Peter Kingsley marshals archaeological and textual evidence connecting him with traditions of incubation, visionary speech, and shamanic spirit travel that have their roots in Ionia and Central Asia.<sup>51</sup> The very fact that Parmenides left a poem and

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47. Loc. cit.

48. A. A. Long, review of Chiara Robbiano, *Becoming Being. On Parmenides' Transformative Philosophy* [International Pre-Platonic Studies vol. 5] (Sankt Augustin, Akademie Verlag, 2006), in *Phronesis: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy* 53, no. 3 (2008): 290–302.

49. Lisa Atwood Wilkinson, *Parmenides and To Eon: Reconsidering Muthos and Logos*. (London, Continuum, 2009), 97.

50. Peter Kingsley, *Reality* (Inverness, CA: Golden Sufi Center, 2008), 62–63.

51. Peter Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom* (Inverness, CA: Golden Sufi Center, 1999), 139 ff; while Kingsley now addresses a larger, mostly spiritually inclined audience, his scholarship continues to command respect in professional circles; see review of *Reality* (*supra*, n. 38) in *Bryn Mawr Classical Review* 7, no. 43(2004).



not prose, however, is itself significant, because to write in epic hexameter in classical Greece was to engage in the specific speech that unites the speaker with the divine and shows things as the gods see them, exactly as they are.<sup>52</sup> Yet the claim implied by this practice is not to relate what is real but to come into its presence. The reality lies in the act instead of the message. In Wilkinson's words, "*aletheia* is constitutive of our ways of speaking and thinking truthfully. That is, we speak and think truthfully rather than speaking or thinking 'the truth.'"<sup>53</sup>

There are also significant parallels between Parmenides's famous claim that being and thinking are one and Fichte's stress on the unity of being and consciousness. Both chart the same route, that of surrendering all separation between a knowing subject and a knowable object, and for both everything is equally divine, as Parmenides's goddess says:

Its name shall be everything—  
every single name that mortals have invented  
convinced they are all true: birth and death,  
existence, non-existence, change of place, alteration  
of bright color.<sup>54</sup>

For both philosophers to see things as they are is not an accomplishment; it emerges of its own when we put away our accomplishments.

This is not to say that Fichte merely revives some eternal truth that was first vouchsafed at the dawn of the West. His ambition and, it seems to me, his achievements extend into fields far outside the project of both Presocratic and Neoplatonic thinkers. The *Wissenschaftslehre* addresses ethics, social life, and politics and provides a grounding and incentive for political action as well as a perspective on both politics and human history. This alone sets it off from its Classical predecessors. For the Neoplatonists the social was ultimately a distraction, and for the Presocratics the proper constitution of the *polis* was a genuine concern, but one that was to be resolved through the private nondiscursive practices that are both narrated and embodied in Parmenides's poem.<sup>55</sup> Neither can help us think through

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52. This association is attested by Hesiod, among others.

53. Wilkinson, *Parmenides and To Eon*, 94.

54. Kingsley, *Reality*, 190.

55. There is archeological evidence that Parmenides himself was venerated as a lawgiver, promulgating laws given to him in visionary trances; see Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*, esp. 204–19.

the roots of our current crises and neither is conducive to egalitarianism or open processes. Both would agree with the elderly Heidegger that "only a god can save us."<sup>56</sup>

Fichte's infinite will, by contrast, is realized in social life and can only be fully manifest in an egalitarian community of complete interpersonal openness. He gives us a way to orient ourselves to the reality of our own world-making, an activity that is both profoundly public and genuinely sacred, and which reveals of its own logic the tasks we must fulfill; and indeed one might well translate the title *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* without too much inaccuracy as *Humanity's Task*.

There is no space in this short essay to go farther. These are resonances enough, though, to suggest that for all of its novelty *The Vocation of Man* reaches back to the very first steps in the Western tradition. This may be a matter of direct influence from the Hermetic tradition<sup>57</sup> or from the afterlife of Neoplatonism in Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa, Jacob Boehme, or Pietists such as Oetinger.<sup>58</sup> It may simply be a product of a rigorous archaeology of Western philosophy, Spinoza, of course, included. It may stem from visionary experience itself, or from a combination of any or all of these. Whatever their sources, such echoes bring home one of the enduring fascinations of classical German philosophy and one source of its continuing relevance. The idealists reopen the earliest questions in our cultural past and, initiatory masters that they are, they challenge the very ground of our self-understanding—not just that of Fichte's hero or of his contemporaries, but of ours today.

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56. Martin Heidegger, "Nur noch ein Gott kann uns retten," *Der Spiegel* 30 (Mai, 1976): 193–219, 209, trans. by W. Richardson as "Only a God Can Save Us," in *Heidegger: The Man and the Thinker*, ed. Thomas Sheehan (Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1981), 45–67.

57. On this see, generally, Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 371 ff.; "Poimandres: The Etymology of the Name and the Origins of the Hermetica," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 56: 1–24; "From Pythagoras to the *Turba philosophorum*: Egypt and Pythagorean Tradition," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 57: 1–13.

58. There are substantial works arguing for a Hermetic influence on Hegel and on Fichte's indebtedness to Eckhart. No literature discussion is needed in this context, but it is clear that esoteric and theosophical ideas play a larger role in this period than they have usually been given credit for.



# J. G. Fichte's *Vocation of Man*

## An Effort to Communicate

YOLANDA ESTES

### Introduction: The Atheism Dispute— A Failure to Communicate

While I was writing my first and hitherto only defenses against the accusation of atheism, I was in fact in a foul mood; and afterwards it did not surprise me in the least that most people maintain that in these defenses I have only further incriminated myself. . . . I was accused from out of the blue; I could only defend myself from out of the blue, because I myself was speculating wherein the misunderstanding might reside. . . . I was not close to hitting on the right thing to do.

—J. G. Fichte, “From a Private Letter”<sup>1</sup>

The appearance of J. G. Fichte’s “On the Ground of our Belief in a Divine World Governance” in 1798 led eventually to the *Atheismusstreit*, or athe-

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1. The ellipses are mine. I condensed this passage from “From a Private Letter,” in *AD*, 253. “From a Private Letter” was originally published as “Aus einem Privatschreiben” in *Philosophisches Journal einer Gesellschaft Teutscher Gelehrten* IX, no. 4 (January 1800) and is available in *GA* I/6, 370–71. In this chapter, references to English translations of Fichte’s work and correspondence will be followed by corresponding references to the original German in *GA*, *SW*, or *FiG* placed in parentheses.

ism dispute, which reached its nadir in April 1799 with Fichte's forced resignation from the University of Jena.<sup>2</sup> After spending the summer and fall of 1799 in Berlin, Fichte returned to Jena, where he completed a small book, *Vocation of Man*, and a brief missive, "From a Private Letter."<sup>3</sup> In the spring of 1800, Fichte settled in Berlin and, the next fall, published a short essay, "Concluding Remark by the Editor."<sup>4</sup> He had "withstood the worst" of the atheism dispute, so he was hoping for "better times" but still recuperating from the psychic cuts and bruises inflicted by his many adversaries, who included his erstwhile heroes and advocates, Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi and Immanuel Kant.<sup>5</sup>

Traditionally, Fichte's "Private Letter" and "Concluding Remark" are perceived as the finale to his "youthful" transcendental idealist, atheistic

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2. "On the Ground of Our Belief in a Divine World Governance" (AD, 21–29 [GA, I, 5, 347–57]) was originally published as "Ueber den Grund unsers Glaubens an ein göttliche Weltregierung" in *Philosophisches Journal einer Gesellschaft Teutscher Gelehrten* VIII, no. 1 (Jena/Leipzig: Gabler, 1798).

For more details in English on the history of the atheism dispute see Anthony La Vopa's *Fichte: The Self and the Calling of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 368–424, henceforth abbreviated as FSCP; Daniel Breazeale's introduction to EPW; Yolanda Estes's entries "Controversies: Atheism, Pantheism, Spinozism" and "Fichte, Johann Gottlieb," in *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief*, ed. Tom Flynn (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2007), 217–19 and 328–29; and Yolanda Estes's introduction and commentaries in AD.

3. BM (*Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, GA I/6, 181–309) was published soon after "Private Letter" in January 1800.

4. "Concluding Remark by the Editor" (AD, 276–81 [GA I/6, 411–16]) was originally published as "Erklärung der Herausgeber, die Fortsetzung dieses Phil. Journals betreffend" in the *Philosophisches Journal einer Gesellschaft Teutscher Gelehrten* X, no. 3 (September 1800): 245–60. Although this issue of the *Philosophisches Journal* was published in 1800, it was supposed to appear in 1798 and the greater part of "Concluding Remark" was probably complete at that time.

5. "Private Letter," AD, 252–53 (GA I/6, 370–71). Jacobi (1743–1819) sent a letter condemning the *Wissenschaftslehre* to Fichte on 21 March 1799 (GA III/3, 224–81), which he published as *Jacobi an Fichte* (Hamburg: Perthes, 1799). The English translation of this letter, *Jacobi to Fichte*, is published in *Jacobi: The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, ed. and trans. George di Giovanni (Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press, 1994), 497–536, henceforth abbreviated as MPW. Kant published a "Declaration concerning Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*" renouncing Fichte in the *Intelligencer of the Allgemeineliteratur-Zeitung*, 28 August 1799 (AA, 12, 370). The English translation of this "Declaration" is published in *Kant's Correspondence*, ed. and trans. Arnulf Zweig (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 559–61.

*Religionslehre*, or religious theory, whereas *Vocation of Man* is regarded as the overture to his “mature” absolute idealist, theistic *Religionslehre*.<sup>6</sup> According to this view, the older, judicious Fichte was “improved by criticism,” which the younger, imprudent Fichte had ignored during the *Atheismusstreit*.<sup>7</sup> Nevertheless, I propose that Fichte did not change his philosophy in *Vocation of Man*, but that he altered his communication style in order to make his *Religionslehre*, and his entire *Wissenschaftslehre*, more accessible to a public audience.

Fichte surely needed to change his manner of communicating. Despite remarkable success in articulating his philosophy clearly and dynamically to students in lectures, he had failed piteously in explaining the same ideas to readers in texts. Moreover, despite his ability to understand and respond affably to informal, verbal objections from students during his tenure in Jena, he had seemed incapable of tolerating or even comprehending formal, written disapproval from critics and authorities during the atheism dispute. Indeed, the entire *Atheismusstreit* was a cycle of miscommunication, which Fichte perpetuated by writing defenses that offended and alarmed the literate society, the academic community, and the enlightened nobility.

Although “Divine Governance” was a concise, relatively transparent text, it was intended for readers versed in transcendental philosophy. Thus, when an anonymous author distorted its content in *A Father's Letter to his Student Son about Fichte's and Forberg's Atheism* (and then redirected this caricature to educated, but philosophically naive, readers), Fichte was accused of atheism.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, he responded by publishing an acerbic,

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6. This traditional account of Fichte's development is not accepted universally. Other scholars, most notably Yves Radrizanni, have argued that the *Vocation of Man* is consistent with Fichte's early *Wissenschaftslehre* and his writings from the atheism dispute. See Yves Radrizanni, “The Place of the *Vocation of Man* in Fichte's Work,” in *New Essays on Fichte's Later Jena Wissenschaftslehre*, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 317–44. I agree with this claim and have argued for the compatibility of Fichte's early and late *Religionslehre*. See Yolanda Estes, “After Jena: Fichte's *Religionslehre*,” in *After Jena: New Essays on Fichte's Later Philosophy*, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008), 99–114.

7. “Private Letter,” AD, 253 (GA I/6, 370).

8. *A Father's Letter to his Student Son about Fichte's and Forberg's Atheism* (AD, 57–75 [GA I/6, 121–38]) was published originally as *Schreiben eines Vaters an seines studierenden Sohn über den Fichtischen und Forbergischen Atheismus* (Nürnberg: 1798). The unidentified author signed it with a G. For more information about this infamous brief, see AD, 49–56 and GA I/6, 15–24.

dense *Appeal to the Public*, which insulted and confused the very *Publikum* it addressed.<sup>9</sup> Fichte complicated this blunder by dashing off an equally provocative and opaque *Juridical Defense* to the noble courts that went similarly amiss with its recipients.<sup>10</sup>

Fichte's attempts to defend himself from the charge of atheism only garnered new allegations of pantheism, egoism, fatalism, and nihilism, which he did not fully understand until the end of the *Atheismusstreit*.<sup>11</sup> In this chapter, I argue that Fichte uses *Vocation of Man* to accomplish three goals: (1) He *develops* the philosophical *distinctions* expressed in his "Private Letter" and "Concluding Remark"; (2) He *reaffirms* the philosophical *assertions* stated in his "Divine World Governance"; (3) He *alters* the approach to philosophical *communication* in his public discourse.

### Criticisms of Fichte

I was able to glean little or nothing . . . from the . . . nonsense that has been written against me, until finally . . . I extracted the following: "My doctrine is—if . . . one is willing to spare me the odious term *atheism*— . . . *pantheism*. According to me, . . . *the moral world order is itself God, and we require no other God*. Indeed, it is *they*, and *I*, and *we all* who are the members constituting this moral world, and our relation-

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9. *Appeal to the Public* [about the Electoral Saxon Confiscation Rescript: A Writing One is Requested to Read before Confiscating] (AD, 92–125 [GA I/5, 415–53]) was originally published as *Appellation an das Publikum Über die durch ein Kurf. Sächs. Confiscationsrescript ihm Beigemessenen Atheistischen Aeusserungen: Eine Schrift, die Man Erst zu Lesen Bittet, ehe Man Sie Confisciert* (Jena/Leipzig/Tübingen: Gabler and Cotta, 1799). For more information about the publication and distribution of the *Appeal to the Public*, see FiG, 5, 272–73; GA I/5, 377–92; FSCP, 402–23; and AD, 85–91.

10. Fichte's *Juridical Defense* (AD, 157–204 [GA I/6, 26–84]) was the first part of a joint defense by Fichte and Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer (GA I/6, 26–143), which was sent to the patrons of the University of Jena before Fichte was dismissed. After his dismissal, it was published as *Der Herausgeber des Philosophischen Journals gerichtliche Verantwortungsschriften gegen die Anklage des Atheismus* (Jena: Gabler, 1799). For more information about the *Juridical Defense*, see FiG, 5, 272–78; GA I/6, 3–16; FSCP, 379–88; and AD, 145–56 and 205–12.

11. These allegations did not arise solely as reactions to "Divine World Governance," *Appeal to the Public*, and *Juridical Defense*, but Fichte recognized the need to address the charges of pantheism, egoism, fatalism, and nihilism specifically only after writing his ill-fated responses to the general accusation of atheism. See "Private Letter," AD, 254 (GA I/6, 371–72). Moreover, Jacobi published *Jacobi to Fichte* (wherein he condemned Fichte for egoism, fatalism, and nihilism) as a retort to *Appeal to the Public* (wherein Fichte had claimed an alliance with Jacobi and pled for his support). See AD, 121 (GA I/5, 447–48).

ship to one another . . . is the *order* of this world. . . . Consequently, either we *are* ourselves God, or we ourselves *make* God." . . . Thus informed, it has no longer surprised me in the least to read . . . that I deny a *living, powerful, and active* God [and] that my God is a *concept through and through* and the like.

—J. G. Fichte, "From a Private Letter"<sup>12</sup>

Three main criticisms were directed against Fichte during the atheism dispute: (1) Fichte was an atheist or an agnostic because he denied various claims about the existence or nature of God; (2) Fichte was a pantheist or an egoist because he identified God with the moral law, the moral community, or the moral subject; (3) Fichte was a fatalist or a nihilist because his abstract philosophy disregarded concrete moral and religious experience.<sup>13</sup>

Many of Fichte's detractors accused him of atheism or agnosticism because they believed his concept of the moral world order conflicted with customary claims about God's existence and nature. The author of the *Father's Letter* claimed that Fichte's rejection of traditional arguments for God's existence (and of common notions about God's nature as a separate substance, intelligent designer of the moral order, and "creator, preserver, and ruler of all things") amounted to the "coarsest atheism."<sup>14</sup> The theologian Paul Joachim Siegmund Vogel also insisted that transcendental philosophy should prove God's objective existence.<sup>15</sup> Johann August Eberhard argued that Fichte could not presume to comprehend God's relation to man without acknowledging an innate concept of God.<sup>16</sup> Jacobi complained that Fichte posited "a concept, a thing of thought, a generality, in lieu of the living God."<sup>17</sup> Johann Kaspar Lavater agreed that a moral order was no substitute for a living, active, and powerful God.<sup>18</sup> According to Jacobi

12. The ellipses are mine. I have condensed this passage from "Private Letter," AD, 254–55 (GA I/6, 272–73).

13. "Johann Kaspar Lavater an Fichte" ["Johann Kaspar Lavater to Fichte"] of 7–12 February 1799 (GA III/3, 187–93).

14. *Father's Letter*, AD, 57–61 and 62–66 (GA I/6, 121–25 and 126–29).

15. "Theoretisch-praktischer Beweis des objectiven Daseyns Gottes," *Neuest theologisches Journal* I, no. 1 (1799): 109–54.

16. *Ueber den Gott des Herrn Professor Fichte und den Götzen seiner Gegner* (Halle: 1799), 21.

17. *Jacobi to Fichte*, MPW, 503–506 (GA III/3, 228–31).

18. "Johann Kaspar Lavater an Fichte" of 7–12 February 1799, GA III/3, 187–93.



and Lavater, Fichte's moral order could not encompass God's nature as a "living, self-subsisting being" and an unlimited, efficacious force that creates order "outside, before, and above" man.<sup>19</sup>

According to several critics, Fichte was a pantheist or an egoist, who identified God with the moral law, the moral community, or the moral subject. One anonymous author accused Fichte of equating the infinite order of the moral world and the finite community of moral subjects.<sup>20</sup> Jacobi also argued that Fichte's moral order was a limited human construction, which described the ordered coexistence between men. He proclaimed that man must choose between "Nothingness or a God; if he chooses nothingness, he makes himself into a God."<sup>21</sup> Additionally, Jacobi condemned the *Wissenschaftslehre* as egoism because he equated its ground—intellectual intuition—with empirical self-consciousness.

A number of Fichte's opponents considered him to be a fatalist or a nihilist, whose philosophy was an empty analysis, arrogant game, or linguistic sophistry that ignored the facts of social, moral, and religious life. Kant called the *Wissenschaftslehre* a "totally indefensible" system of "mere logic" that lacked genuine philosophical or religious import.<sup>22</sup> Eberhard also implied that Fichte's moral order was a mere artifact of conceptual analysis.<sup>23</sup> Although some writers, such as J. G. Dyck, disparaged Fichte for his audacity in asserting the truth of his own philosophy, others, like Jacobi, did not fault Fichte for being an *Alleinphilosoph* but for being a *philosopher* at all.<sup>24</sup> According to Jacobi, Fichte wanted to contain the "foundation of

19. *Jacobi to Fichte*, MPW, 523–26 (GA III/3, 250–53).

20. In this anonymous review of *Appeal to the Public*, which was published in columns 401–16 of the *Oberdeutsche allgemeine Literaturzeitung* (March 1, 1799), the author also criticized Fichte for not accounting for the creation of the moral world order.

21. *Jacobi to Fichte*, MPW, 523–24 (GA III/3, 250).

22. "Declaration," *Kant's Correspondence*, 559–61 (AA, 12, 370).

23. *Ueber den Gott des Herrn Professor Fichte und den Götzen seiner Gegner* (Halle: 1799), 21.

24. *Ueber des Herrn Professor Fichte Appellation an das Publikum. Eine Anmerkung aus der deutschen Uebersetzung des Ersten Bandes von Saint-Lamberts Tugendkinst besonders abgedruckt* (Leipzig: 1799), 6. See also Jacobi's discussion of *Alleinphilosophen*—"quintessential" or "one-sole-philosophy" philosophers—in *Jacobi to Fichte*, MPW, 503–506 (GA III/3, 228–31). Jacobi says to Fichte: "Both of us, living only in the spirit and honest seekers at any cost, are well enough in agreement, I think, about the concept of science" (*Jacobi to Fichte*, MPW, 505 (GA III/3, 231). And again: "Among the Jews of speculative reason I proclaim you once again, ever more zealously and loudly, their King. I threaten the obdurates, that they recognize you as such and accept the Baptist from Königsberg [Kant] only as your prophet instead" (*Jacobi to Fichte*, MPW, 503 [GA III/3, p. 227]). See also, Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel's critique of Jacobi in his review of Jacobi's *Woldemar*, in *Deutschland* III, no. 8 (1796): 202, 205, and 210–11.

all truth" within the *Wissenschaftslehre*, whereas he wanted to keep "this foundation (the *true* itself)" outside of philosophy and all other knowledge.<sup>25</sup> He indicted Fichte for reducing the infinite divine *true* to a finite human *truth*, and thereby, imprisoning God (who is only intimated by *non-knowing*, or faith) within *knowing*, or conception.<sup>26</sup>

Strangely enough, some adversaries, such as Johann Heinrich Gottlieb Heusinger, charged Fichte with moral determinism, arguing that human beings were mere machines of the Categorical Imperative within the *Wissenschaftslehre*.<sup>27</sup> Jacobi also considered Fichte's philosophy to be a type of fatalism, or an "inverse Spinozism," that compared the personal, creative power of God (and the individual, concrete freedom of the moral subject) to the mechanical, self-reverting activity of the I. Worst of all, Jacobi claimed that Fichte's theoretical "egoism" and "fatalism" led to practical amorality and nihilism, which extinguished meaning and order in the present life along with hope and purpose for a future life.<sup>28</sup>

Many of Fichte's adversaries, including the author of *Father's Letter* and the noble sponsors of the University of Jena, feared that Fichte's "nihilism" would undermine common morality and popular religion and, thus, would threaten public welfare, ecclesiastical authority, and state security. In *Father's Letter*, the author complained that the moral subject's cognizance of the moral law cannot provide "assurance that our actions are genuinely good" without extra "higher assistance" from "an independent being that exists apart from the world, is capable of anything, and operates purposefully and intentionally." Moreover, he protested that the moral subject's good will provides inadequate motivation for "satisfying the demands of the moral law" without additional incentive from an "active recollection of God, the author of his nature, the continually present witness to all his actions, wishes, and intentions, his highest benefactor but also his highest lawgiver and judge, to whom he owes his thanks, love, and obedience,

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25. *Jacobi to Fichte*, MPW, 505–506 (GA III/3, 231–32). Jacobi refers to his own mode of thinking as a non-philosophy that produces non-knowledge (*Jacobi to Fichte*, MPW, 501 and 505 [GA III/3, 226 and 231]).

26. *Jacobi to Fichte*, MPW, 513 (GA III/3, 239).

27. *Ueber das idealistisch-atheistische System des Herrn Professor Fichte in Jena* (Dresden/Gotha: 1799). Heusinger also claimed that the *Wissenschaftslehre* was based on a psychological delusion because his consciousness contained no concept of the I. The author of an anonymous review of Heusinger's pamphlet (in the *Erlangen Literatur-Zeitung*, 2 December 1799, Columns 1907–1910) demanded that Fichte refute Heusinger.

28. *Jacobi to Fichte*, MPW, 517–19 (GA III/3, 243–45).

and on whose pleasure or displeasure his eternal weal or woe depends.”<sup>29</sup> Most of all, this writer decried the possibility that “inexperienced young people” (who were destined to serve the public as “clergymen and schoolmasters”) would be misled by the “sophistries of a new philosophy” and its “language of gibberish” (which contained “inaneities and absurdities,” lacked any “common sense at all,” and eliminated the “chief support of virtue”).<sup>30</sup> The Saxon Elector Friedrich August III also believed the *Wissenschaftslehre* contained “dangerous principles” that would weaken innocent children’s belief in “Christian religion” and “natural religion” and would result in “dismal consequences for the common weal” and the “stability of the state.”<sup>31</sup> Duke Karl August of Weimar expressed anxiety that these insidious notions might have been the subject of Fichte’s lectures to impressionable young people.<sup>32</sup> Duke Ernst II Ludwig of Gotha deplored Fichte’s use of a “newly coined terminology that is unintelligible to the vast majority of readers” to publicize “assertions that are liable to be interpreted in the most offensive manner,” which would likely produce the “most detrimental consequences for the commonwealth” and the university, including the “youth who desire to teach.”<sup>33</sup>

### *Vocation of Man as a Development of Fichte’s Philosophical Distinctions*

Man is not a product of the sensible world, and the final purpose of his existence cannot be attained in it. His vocation goes beyond time and space and everything sensible. He must know what he is and what he is to make of himself. As his vocation is lofty, so his thought too must be able to rise entirely above all limits of sensibility. He must have an obligation to this; where his being is at home, there necessarily his thought will also be at home. And the most truly human view which alone is appropriate to him and presents his whole power of thought is the view through which he rises above those limits and through which the whole sensible world is transformed for him purely into

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29. *Father’s Letter*, AD, 66 and 72–74 (GA I/6, 129 and 135–37).

30. *Father’s Letter*, AD, 58 and 66 (GA I/6, 122 and 129).

31. “Saxon Letter of Requisition to the Weimar Court,” AD, 83 (FiG, 2, 25–26).

32. “Weimar Rescript to the University of Jena,” AD, 84 (FiG, 6.1, 316).

33. “Gotha Rescript to the University of Jena,” AD, 213 (FiG, 6.1, 382).

nothingness, into a mere reflection in mortal eyes of the nonsensible, which alone exists.

—J. G. Fichte, *Vocation of Man*<sup>34</sup>

Belatedly, Fichte recognized that the charges against him resulted from “inconsistencies and contradictions” in the minds of readers, who misunderstood essential philosophical distinctions presupposed by his *Religion-slehre*.<sup>35</sup> In “Private Letter” and “Concluding Remark,” Fichte emphasizes three philosophical distinctions: (1) objective proofs and concepts versus transcendental proofs and concepts; (2) the moral world order versus the moral law, subject, and community; (3) moral-religious belief versus empirical and philosophical knowledge. He develops these distinctions by showing the protagonist of *Vocation of Man*’s struggle to comprehend them.<sup>36</sup>

Many of Fichte’s critics failed to differentiate objective proofs and transcendental proofs. An objective proof might show that the assumed truth of “Socrates is a man” linguistically implies the conditional truth of “Socrates is mortal”; or it might reveal that the presumed existence of “smoke” causally implies the conditional existence of “fire.” Such arguments demonstrate ordinary knowledge claims about the relations between the particular contingent features of objective, or empirical, consciousness, but they establish no unconditional existence or truth. Moreover, they must be based on some fundamental principles, or theoretical assumptions, which can only be demonstrated by transcendental proof. Fichte’s rejection of traditional arguments about God’s existence and nature is not an expression of atheistic disbelief but rather a theoretical observation about the purpose and limitation of objective proofs.

Transcendental proofs demonstrate philosophical knowledge claims about the relations between the universal and necessary features of pure subjective, or transcendental, consciousness.<sup>37</sup> A transcendental proof

34. VM, 114–15 (GA I/6, 300).

35. “Private Letter,” AD, 253–54 (GA I/6, 371).

36. Note Fichte’s assertion that the development of the principles presumed by “Divine World Governance” is “most fully carried out” in *Vocation of Man* (“Private Letter,” AD, 264 [GA I/6, 387–89]). These three particular distinctions might be construed as aspects of one general distinction between philosophy and life.

37. “Concluding Remark,” AD, 276–81 (GA I/6, 411–16); “Divine World Governance,” 21–29 (GA I/5, 347–57); “Private Letter,” AD, 263 (GA I/6, 386–89); VM, 27, 46, 72 (GA I/6, 215, 234, 257–58).

might show that thinking of the I is necessarily connected to performing a self-reverting activity; or it might reveal that thinking of a duty is necessarily connected to affirming the conditions for fulfilling that duty. Such arguments establish the philosophical “truth” that one idea, or mental activity, produces, or conditions, another, but they demonstrate no empirical existence or objective truth, and they establish no unconditional existence or truth.<sup>38</sup> Moreover, they must ultimately be based on some fundamental principle, or practical assumption, which can only be approved by immediate consciousness, or belief.<sup>39</sup> Fichte’s refusal to give a philosophical argument for God’s existence is not an expression of agnostic doubt but rather a practical observation about the purpose and limitation of transcendental proofs.<sup>40</sup> His *Religionslehre* does not objectively prove the truth of religion or the existence of God, but rather explains the transcendental relation between religious belief and moral activity.

Many critics were also confused by Fichte’s approach to philosophical terminology and language.<sup>41</sup> Fichte treats conceptual terms as names that signify, or symbolize, intelligible activities and the relations between those activities.<sup>42</sup> He uses the “concept of God” as a name, which refers to human thinking about an unlimited efficacious activity, rather than as a definition that provides a finite delimitation of a divine being or substance. Likewise, “moral world order” indicates an activity, which creates a dynamic relation between intelligible events, rather than a passive array that consists in the static relations between sensible things.<sup>43</sup> Fichte denies God’s nature as a separate substance, intelligent designer, or personal creator, because he rejects the application of particular technical terms to the transcendental philosopher’s concept of God rather than the application of particular popular metaphors to the religious believer’s notion of God. His *Religionslehre* does not deny God’s divine life, power, or activity by reducing God to a mere concept, imaginative thought, or arbitrary construction;

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38. VM, 27 and 46 (GA I/6, 215 and 234); “Private Letter,” AD, 257–58 (GA I/6, 377); and “Concluding Remark,” AD, 276 (GA I/6, 411–12).

39. VM, 70–72 (GA I/6, 256–58).

40. “Concluding Remark,” AD, 277–78 (GA I/6, 412–14). See also *Juridical Defense*, AD, 179–81 (GA I/6, 52–54).

41. “Private Letter,” AD, 255–57 (GA I/6, 373–77).

42. See Fichte’s discussions of philosophical terms, concepts, and arguments in “Concerning the Difference between the Spirit and the Letter in Philosophy” (EPW, 192–216) and in *Die Anweisung zum seligen Leben, oder auch der Religionslehre* [*The Way to the Blessed Life: Or also, the Religionslehre*], ed. Fritz Medicus (Hamburg: Meiner, 1910), 32–33.

43. “Private Letter,” AD, 255–57 (GA I/6, 373–74).

it describes the transcendental connection between certain universal and necessary mental activities.<sup>44</sup>

In the *Vocation of Man*, the protagonist's initial effort to provide objective proof of his "wish and demand" that he be "independent and free of the influence of all external forces," leads him to conclude that he is a "thoroughly determined link in the chain of nature."<sup>45</sup> After he dispels this fear by producing a transcendental proof that "in what we call knowledge and observation of things we always and ever only know and observe ourselves," he complains "if nothing outside of knowledge corresponds to any of my knowledge then I think I will have been defrauded of my whole life."<sup>46</sup> Finally, the protagonist recognizes that "[n]o knowledge can be its own foundation and proof," because belief "first gives approval to knowledge," and so "every supposed truth, which is to be produced by mere thinking without having its roots in faith, will surely be false and fallacious."<sup>47</sup> Having differentiated objective proofs and concepts from philosophical proofs and concepts, and having recognized the purpose and limitations of each, he realizes that transcendental philosophy is neither atheistic nor agnostic.

A number of Fichte's opponents conflated the different aspects of the supersensible world, which includes the moral law, the individual moral subject, the community of moral subjects, and the moral world order.<sup>48</sup> According to Fichte, the moral law requires the moral subject to obey without any incentive other than respect for morality, so moral willing is the only goal of the moral subject's activity; but since cognition is discursive, the moral subject must think about the act of moral willing as one member in a series of events, which is connected to a final end by an ordering principle.<sup>49</sup> Moreover, the moral law requires the moral subject to obey without disturbing another moral subject's freedom, so the moral subject cannot intend to influence others against their will; but since cognition

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44. VM, 64–71 and 111 (GA I/6, 252–57 and 296); and "Private Letter," AD, 255–56, 258, and 265–66 (GA I/6, 373–74, 377, and 378). See also FTP, 471n. (WLnm[H], 265); *Appeal to the Public*, AD, 103–104 and 107–108 (GA I/5, 428 and 433); *Juridical Defense*, AD, 176–79 (GA I/6, 49–52); and "Divine World Governance," AD, 26 (GA I/5, 354).

45. VM, 22–26 (GA I/6, 210–14).

46. VM, 59–67 (GA I/6, 246–53).

47. VM, 71–72 (GA I/6, 257–58).

48. VM, pp. 79–81 and 104–114 (GA I/6, 265–66 and 290–99); and "Private Letter," AD, 258–63 (GA I/6, 378–85).

49. "Private Letter," AD, 258–63 (GA I/6, 379–84). See also FTP, 173 (WLnm(K), 67 and WLnm(H), 61) and *Die Anweisung zum seligen Leben*, 64.

is discursive, the moral subject must think about everyone as members of a moral community, whose activities are related to a highest purpose by a unifying principle.<sup>50</sup> In the *Religionslehre*, the moral law and the moral community (and the moral individual, who stands in a reciprocal relation with others) are distinct parts of a moral world organized by the moral order.<sup>51</sup>

Fichte's opponents also conflated the pure I and the empirical I. Fichte emphasized the difference between the pure, self-determining I, which is the theoretical principle of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, and the individual self-consciousness of the philosophical and moral subject, which is the practical sanction of that principle. The pure I is a theoretical postulate, which the philosopher uses as an abstract hypothesis to explain objective consciousness; and it is a practical end, which the moral agent uses as a regulative concept to guide objective activity.<sup>52</sup> In Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre*, the individual ego is not the order of the moral world, the goal of morality, or the basis of philosophy but is dependent on the social and moral community, deferent to the freedom of others, submissive to the moral law, and reliant on the moral order.<sup>53</sup>

In *Vocation of Man*, the protagonist endeavors to understand the relations between the pure and empirical I and between the various aspects of the moral world. He soon accepts that the "finite individual, who is not the rational world but only one among many of its members, necessarily lives at the same time in a sensible order," but "every finite being's sensible life points to a higher one into which the will may conduct him merely through itself, and in which it may secure him a place."<sup>54</sup> The protagonist comes to understand that humanity is "destined to unify itself into one single body," wherein each individual "will truly love every other as himself," and wherein each will be "nothing more than a mere component that can only win or lose together with the whole."<sup>55</sup> He eventually comprehends: "My will is mine, and it is the only thing which is entirely

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50. VM, 117 (GA I/6, 302).

51. VM, 104 (GA I/6, 290). See also, "Private Letter," AD, 260–63 (GA I/6, 381 and 384).

52. VM, 68–69 and 98 (GA I/6, 254–55 and 283). See also, "Concluding Remark," AD, 276 and 278–79 (GA I/6, 411 and 414–15); and *Some Lectures Concerning the Scholar's Vocation*, EPW, 148–49 and 157 (SW, VI, 296–97 and 307).

53. VM, 90, 98–102, 106–107, 111, 117, 116–118, and 121–22 (GA I/6, 283–88, 257–56, 291–93, 296, 300, 302–303, and 307).

54. VM, 99 (GA I/6, 284–85).

55. VM, 85 and 90 (GA I/6, 271 and 275–76).

mine and completely depends on me," but there is a law of the spiritual world, "which is not given by my will nor by the will of any finite being nor by the will of all finite beings taken together, but to which my will and the will of all finite beings are themselves subject."<sup>56</sup> After he grasps these distinctions, the protagonist appreciates that transcendental idealism is not an atheistic, pantheistic, or egoistic philosophy.

Quite a few of Fichte's detractors misunderstood the difference between moral-religious faith and empirical and philosophical knowledge.<sup>57</sup> Transcendental knowledge justifies the fundamental principles of empirical knowledge, which is necessary for life; but the purpose of life, and so the "final purpose of knowledge," is moral activity.<sup>58</sup> Theoretical philosophy cannot justify its own fundamental principle, which must be grounded on a practical belief that is not knowledge "but a decision of the will to recognize the validity of knowledge."<sup>59</sup> Faith establishes both the nonphilosopher's relation to the divine and the philosopher's "foundation of all truth," whereas philosophy relates the objects of faith to the rest of thinking: So, the *Wissenschaftslehre* is not a nihilistic, fatalistic system, or a "confusing game," that reduces the world to a "meaningless and mere deceptive image."<sup>60</sup>

Initially, the protagonist of *Vocation of Man* regards the distinction between "knowledge" and "love" (or empirical knowledge of material determinism and immediate self-consciousness of spiritual freedom) as posing a dispute between equally valuable but irreconcilable worldviews.<sup>61</sup> Later, after settling this difference philosophically, he regards transcendental

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56. VM, 95 and 104 (GA I/6, 280 and 290).

57. For this reason, they also failed to see the differences between philosophy, religion, theology, and ministry. For Fichte's discussions of these particular differences, see VM, 27, 59–60, 74–75, 101–103, 111–13, and 114–115 (GA I/6, 215, 247, 260–61, 287–89, 297–99, and 300). See also "Divine World Governance," AD, 23 (GA I/5, 351); "Private Letter," AD, 257–58 and 263–64 (GA I/6, 377–78 and 386–89); and "Concluding Remark," AD, 278–80 (GA I/6, 414–16).

58. VM, 64–65 and 67–68 (GA I/6, 251–52 and 253–54). See also "Private Letter," AD, 257–58 (GA I/6, 377–78); "Concluding Remark," AD, 279 (GA I/6, 414–15); and Fichte's letter "To Reinhold" and the attached "Fragment," EPW, 428–37 (GA III/3, 325–33, No. 440).

59. VM, 70–73, 76, 79, and 97 (GA I/6, 256–59, 262, 264–65, and 283).

60. VM, 71, 74, and 75 (GA I/6, 257, 260, and 261). Fichte also addresses the accusation of nihilism in VM, 81–93, 110, and 117 (GA I/6, 267–76, 277–78, 295–96, and 303). See also, "Private Letter," AD, 257–58 (GA I/6, 377).

61. VM, 24–26 (GA I/6, 212–14).



knowledge as a “system of mere images” that transforms reality into “a dream of a dream without meaning or purpose.”<sup>62</sup> Finally, he learns that this seeming conflict between philosophy and life results from treating the perspectives of knowledge and belief as competing theoretical positions rather than recognizing that ultimately all knowledge claims depend on practical motives and beliefs, which are “more and higher than all knowledge.”<sup>63</sup> Having discovered that this difference between belief and knowledge is “no mere verbal distinction but a true deeply founded distinction of the most important consequence,” he understands that transcendental idealism is not an agnostic or atheistic system.<sup>64</sup> Realizing that transcendental idealism is appropriate to his “dignity and vocation,” the protagonist understands that it is not nihilistic. Finally, because he recognizes that believing involves a free acceptance of knowledge (and that knowing involves a free acceptance of belief), which he chooses not because he “must” but because he “wants” to, he apprehends that transcendental idealism is not fatalistic.<sup>65</sup>

### *Vocation of Man as a Reaffirmation of Fichte’s Philosophical Assertions*

The conviction of our moral vocation is itself already issued from a moral disposition, and is *faith*. . . . The element of all certainty is faith. . . . There is no firm standpoint other than . . . the one grounded by our moral disposition.

—J. G. Fichte, “Divine World Governance”<sup>66</sup>

This voluntary acquiescence in the view [that] naturally presents itself to us, because only on this view can we fulfill our vocation, . . . first gives approval to knowledge and raises to certainty and conviction what without it would be mere deception. . . . All my conviction is only faith; and it proceeds from my disposition.

—J. G. Fichte, *Vocation of Man*<sup>67</sup>

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62. VM, 62–65 (GA I/6, 250–52).

63. VM, 68 (GA I/6, 254).

64. VM, 71 (GA I/6, 257).

65. VM, 74 (GA I/6, 259).

66. “Divine World Governance,” AD, 23 (GA I/5, 351).

67. VM, 71 (GA I/6, 257). See also, VM, 75 (GA I/6, 261). Compare “Divine World Governance,” AD, 25 (GA I/5, 354).

According to Fichte, *Religionslehre* explains what morality *requires* us to *believe* when we *think* about ourselves and the world.<sup>68</sup> In "Divine World Governance," Fichte made four main philosophical assertions about religion: (1) Man's moral disposition presumes belief in a supersensible world; (2) God is not a material substance, an individual person, or a causal creator but a living, active, creative order of the supersensible world; (3) Genuine religious practice consists in dutiful willing in obedience to the moral law without concern for sensible consequences; (4) Moral-Religious belief is the ultimate ground of all practical conviction and theoretical certainty. *Vocation of Man* reaffirms these assertions.

In "Divine World Governance," Fichte argued that man's moral disposition presumes belief in a supersensible world, and he reiterates this claim in *Vocation of Man*.<sup>69</sup> Both texts assert that the moral subject cannot obey the moral law without thinking of moral willing as actually accomplishing its goal and thus, that the moral subject must acknowledge all of the conditions "presupposed as true and certain by the possibility of that obedience."<sup>70</sup> These conditions include not only material things, human bodies, and a lawful sensible world order but also a supersensible world that encompasses the moral law, the moral subjects' wills, and the moral world order. This supersensible world is not simply postulated as a possibility, which the moral subject hopes to attain when sensible life on earth ends, but rather: "Heaven, as it is called, does not lie beyond the grave. It already surrounds us here and its light is kindled in every pure heart."<sup>71</sup> In deciding "to obey the law of reason," the moral subject participates in the supersensible world, which "is present" and is "no more present at one point of finite existence than at another" or "than at this moment."<sup>72</sup>

In "Divine World Governance," Fichte stated that the living, active, creative order of the supersensible world is not a material being, an individual person, or a causal creator, and he maintains this same position in *Vocation of Man*.<sup>73</sup> This moral order "is itself God; we require no other God

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68. VM, 264–71 (GA I/6, 252–57); "Private Letter," AD, 258 (GA I/6, 377); and FTP, 471n. (WLnml[H], 265).

69. "Divine World Governance," AD, 23–24 (GA I/5, 351–53); and VM, 79–81, 94–96, and 107–108 (GA I/6, 265–66, 279–82, and 293).

70. VM, 76 and 79–81 (GA I/6, 261 and 265–66). Compare "Divine World Governance," AD, 24 (GA I/5, 352–53).

71. VM, 94–95 (GA I/6, 280). Compare "Divine World Governance," AD, 24–25 (GA I/5, 353–54).

72. VM, 99–100 (GA I/6, 385).

73. VM, 112 (GA I/6, 297).

and can grasp no other.”<sup>74</sup> Thinking of God as an individual person reduces the infinite moral order to the status of a finite human being whereas thinking of God as a material being reduces the unlimited spiritual order to the status of a limited sensible thing. Thinking of God as a causal creator of the sensible world reduces the free moral order to a deterministic amoral force whereas thinking of God as a causal creator of the supersensible world reduces the free moral order to a deterministic extramoral mechanism.<sup>75</sup>

Both “Divine World Governance” and *Vocation of Man* present God as a pure “will” or an internal “law” of the moral world order rather than as a material “cause” of the sensible world or an external “creator” of the spiritual world.<sup>76</sup> In “Divine World Governance,” Fichte denied that God is comprehensible by finite reason, comprisable by limited concepts, or fully communicable by human terms, and he expresses this same view in *Vocation of Man*.<sup>77</sup> In both texts, God appears as a living sublime or “holy will,” as an active “highest thought” or spiritual law, and as an enduring “tranquil spirit” or “infinite reason,” which “no name can name and no concept encompass.”<sup>78</sup>

In “Divine World Governance,” Fichte claimed that genuine religious practice consists in dutiful willing in obedience to the moral law without concern for sensible consequences, and he reinforces this account in *Vocation of Man* by adding more thorough discussions of religion, popular religion, and true religion.<sup>79</sup> Accordingly, “true atheism, genuine unbelief, and godlessness consist of quibbling about the consequences of one’s actions, in not being willing to obey the voice of one’s conscience until one believes

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74. “Divine World Governance,” AD, 26 and 27 (GA I/5, 355 and 356).

75. “Divine World Governance,” AD, 26 (GA I/5, 355).

76. “Divine World Governance,” AD, 26 (GA I/5, 354–55); and VM, 98–99 and 110–11 (GA I/6, 284 and 296).

77. “Divine World Governance,” AD, 26–27 and 29 (GA I/5, 350 and 355). Note also Fichte’s interpolations and emphases in his quotation from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Faust: Ein Trauerspiel* ([Leipzig: 1790], 137–39) at the end of “Divine World Governance” (AD, 26–27 [GA I/5, 355]). Compare VM, 111–12 (GA I/6, 296–98). See also, “Private Letter,” AD, 249, 255–56, and 265–66 (GA I/6, 373–74 and 378).

78. “Divine World Governance,” AD, 26 (GA I/5, 354); and VM, 104, 106, and 111 (GA I/6, 289, 291, and 296). Note also Fichte’s emphases in his quotation of Friedrich von Schiller’s “Worte des Glaubens” (*Musen Almanach für das Jahr 1798* [Tübingen: 1798], 221–22) at the end of “Divine World Governance” (AD, 26–27 [GA I/5, 355]).

79. “Divine World Governance,” AD, 25–26 (GA I/5, 354). See Fichte’s discussions of religion, popular religion, and true religion in VM, 97–103, 112–14, and 112–20 [GA I/6, 283–89, 298–99, and 298–306].

oneself to have foreseen a good outcome, thereby elevating one's own counsel above God's counsel and making oneself into a god."<sup>80</sup> He presents the "sacred doctrine" of Christianity as "imagery," which requires "actually giving up the sensuous and its purposes for the law," but which, amounts to nothing but "silly fables" to "maintain public decorum" if conceived as "the promise of continuing into all eternity the same miserable existence which we live down here."<sup>81</sup>

In "Divine World Governance," Fichte said that moral-religious belief is the ultimate ground of practical conviction and theoretical certainty, and he reaffirms this point in *Vocation of Man*.<sup>82</sup> Both texts treat the empirical world as the sensible manifestation of moral obligation, regarding confidence in sensible reality and divine providence as imposed on the moral subject by duty.<sup>83</sup> Both "Divine World Governance" and *Vocation of Man* treat philosophical knowledge as grounded in extraphilosophical moral consciousness, asserting that moral belief in the supersensible world is the sole "firm standpoint" on which every other conviction and truth rests.<sup>84</sup> As the foundation of certainty, faith is thus "no knowledge, but a decision of the will to recognize the validity of knowledge," which the moral subject "cannot quibble, subtilize, or explain," and which the moral subject "cannot will" to doubt or to "even think the possibility that it is not so."<sup>85</sup> It is, nonetheless, not an "arbitrary assumption," an irrational illusion, or a pious wish that the moral subject freely decides to "regard as true."<sup>86</sup> Instead, "whatever is grounded in reason is absolutely necessary; and whatever is not necessary is precisely on that account contrary to reason," so any "supposed truth" that is not grounded in conscience is "false and fallacious" and "whatever is opposed to conscience and to the possibility and resolution of acting according to conscience, is surely false and it is not possible to be convinced of it."<sup>87</sup>

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80. "Divine World Governance," *AD*, 25 (GA I/5, 354). Compare *VM*, 116 (GA I/6, 302).

81. *VM*, 102–103 (GA I/6, 288). Compare "Private Letter," *AD*, 263 (GA I/6, 388).

82. "Divine World Governance," *AD*, 23 and 27 (GA I/5, 351–52 and 355–56); and *VM*, 71 and 76 (GA I/6, 257 and 261).

83. "Divine World Governance," *AD*, 25 (GA I/5, 353); and *VM*, 78 (GA I/6, 263–64).

84. "Divine World Governance," *AD*, 23 (GA I/5, 351–52); and *VM*, 97 (GA I/6, 283).

85. *VM*, 71 (GA I/6, 257); and "Divine World Governance," *AD*, 23 (GA I/5, 351).

86. "Divine World Governance," *AD*, 22 (GA I/5, 348).

87. "Divine World Governance," *AD*, 22 (GA I/5, 348); and *VM*, 72 (GA I/6, 258).

*Vocation of Man* as an Alteration of Fichte's  
Approach to Philosophical Communication

[T]he I who speaks in the book is by no means the author. Rather the author wishes that the reader may come to see himself in this "I"; that the reader . . . will actually converse with himself, deliberate back and forth, deduce conclusions, make decisions like his representative in the book, and through his own work and reflection, purely out of his own resources, develop and build within himself the philosophical disposition that is presented to him in this book merely as a picture.

—J. G. Fichte, *Vocation of Man*<sup>88</sup>

Despite substantive similarities, "Divine World Governance" and *Vocation of Man* use different literary and didactic means to address different audiences. "Divine World Governance" offers the philosophically trained reader, who already occupies the standpoint of philosophy, a genetic derivation of religious belief; and thus, it employs transcendental terms and methods that aid the reader in understanding the argument by plotting the most efficient course from premise to conclusion. *Vocation of Man* summons the philosophically naive, but educated, reader from the standpoint of life to the standpoint of philosophy; and thus, it encourages the reader to become self-reflective by using affective imagery that draws the philosophical novice into an internal dialogue.

In Fichte's early lectures on "Morality for Scholars," he described philosophical communication as a dialogue. Although the atheism dispute undermined his confidence that the academic community and the literate society possessed the requisite interests and skills for participating in a mutual discussion about transcendental philosophy, his resolve to initiate the conversation with the diverse public increased. Fichte's determination becomes apparent in *Vocation of Man*, which uses a dialogue between a philosophical mentor and novice as a model to assist the reader in developing a philosophical disposition.

*Vocation of Man* is an alteration of Fichte's approach to philosophical communication that reflects the account of philosophical thinking and

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88. VM, 2 (GA I/6, 189–90). Compare Fichte's statement about his pedagogical intentions in *Vocation of Man* to his statement about teaching philosophy in "The Spirit and the Letter within Philosophy" (EPW, 196–97).

teaching presented in "Morality for Scholars." Fichte distinguished between the spirit and the letter, or body, in philosophy. Spirit is the imaginative activity of transforming feelings into ideas, or concepts and ideals, within the conscious subject's mind. Spiritual, or mental, activity is what we ordinarily call "thinking." Philosophy is the spiritual activity of thinking about "thinking," or forming concepts about the activities of reproducing concepts and producing ideals. In constructing derivations, or proofs, the philosopher demonstrates the positions of some ideas relative to others by tracing the genitive development of some activities from others.

Ideas can be expressed through the media of bodies and letters, or sensible signs, which are configurations of sound, color, or shape that symbolize the mental activities of conceiving and idealizing. Philosophical ideas (namely, concepts and proofs) can be expressed through sensible signs (namely, terms and principles) that symbolize mental activities and the genetic relations between those activities.<sup>89</sup> Communication (about philosophy or any other subject) involves offering symbols of ideas to others so that they might interpret those symbols and then, attempt to perform similar mental activities (thereby producing similar ideas), which they would express sensibly. The success of this mediated interchange depends on each participant grasping the intended meaning of the other participants by forming the ideas (or performing the activities) independently that the others associated with the symbols originally.

A direct comparison of different individuals' ideas is impossible, so the process of real human interaction only approximates the ideal of complete communication. Communication can be regarded as successful if the participants agree that their symbolic interchange permitted a relative congruence of meaning on some occasion. Nonetheless, any effort to communicate indicates the participants' resolve and capacity to enter a reciprocal interaction with others and, thus, presupposes a relationship of mutual trust and respect. The aspiring communicators summon others to trust the sincerity of their motives and to respect the authenticity of their abilities, and thereby, they recognize others as warranting their trust and respect. This postulate of mutual trust and respect presupposes an ideal equality that can only be emulated in real relationships, wherein individuals differ with regard to personal interests and skills that they developed through prior interactions with others. In ordinary human interactions, an aspiring communicator might elide a seemingly vicious cycle of miscommunication

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89. On philosophical terms and communication, see VM, 38–39 (GA I/6, 226).

and inequality by engaging another's interest, initiating interactions that mitigate inequities, and providing models of successful communication.<sup>90</sup>

How can an aspiring philosophical mentor summon a novice—who has never engaged in philosophical activity, and who is possibly reluctant or unprepared to do so—to join a philosophical dialogue? The mentor might engage the novice's interest with colorful illustrations and powerful metaphors. The mentor might also mitigate technical and theoretical inequities by initiating discussions about concrete examples of philosophical concepts or practical applications of philosophical principles. Moreover, the mentor might provide a model of successful communication by describing a philosophical dialogue between an imaginary youth and a figurative spirit. Fichte adopts precisely these strategies in *Vocation of Man*.

*Vocation of Man* relates the tale of a philosophical novice's journey from the practical to the transcendental standpoint, through the crests and crannies of philosophical speculation, and then, back to life again. Fichte engages the reader's interest with the vivid portrait of this young, sincere, and thoughtful protagonist, who is troubled by seeming conflicts between faith and knowledge. He introduces an allegorical Spirit, who mitigates the fictitious youth's (and the actual reader's) philosophical deficiencies by initiating a dialogue about this seeming conflict that requires little technical vocabulary or theoretical methodology but that includes relatively concrete examples of philosophical concepts and relatively practical applications of philosophical principles. This mentoring Spirit offers a model of philosophical abstraction and reflection, which the novice first follows and then emulates. The mentor and novice engage in a reciprocal interaction wherein each challenges the other to articulate and defend his assertions. Before the reader's eyes, the novice becomes an apprentice philosopher, who asks his own questions, constructs his own arguments, and draws his own conclusions, which he expresses in his own words. Finally, the mentor leaves his pupil alone to reflect upon their investigation of the theoretical concerns of philosophy and relate that inquiry to the practical concerns of life.

Several aspects of the encounter between the spiritual guide and the youthful protagonist are notable. The novice is not seeking ordinary knowledge: He is already asking questions that only philosophy can answer.

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90. For example, an adult might engage an infant's interest with brightly colored or boldly shaped objects. Moreover, the adult might mitigate verbal inequities by initiating an interaction in "sign-language" or "baby-talk." Likewise, the adult might provide models of successful communication by conversing with other adults and children, or by singing songs, reciting verses, and reading aloud in the infant's presence.

"What am I myself, and what is my vocation?" the youth inquires; but he has "no sufficient reason for deciding" between the answers provided by faith and by knowledge, because his ultimate concern about "whether love should be subordinated to knowledge or knowledge to love" is a philosophical issue.<sup>91</sup> The mentor summons the novice to enter a reciprocal relationship as an active participant who is expected to make independent judgments: He urges the novice to test, question, or berate his statements, but he does not hedge, dissemble, or patronize. "I cannot deceive you," he says, "for you will grant me everything I say. And if you are deceived nevertheless, it will be by you."<sup>92</sup> The mentoring Spirit promises only to free the novice from false knowledge not to teach the truth: The mentor requires the novice to re-express the development of their philosophical inquiry, to draw conclusions from that inquiry, and to discover truth on his own.<sup>93</sup> In the end, the Spirit says to the apprentice philosopher "I leave you alone with yourself."<sup>94</sup> However, the apprentice has developed a philosophical disposition, so he takes heart: He will allow nothing external to "irretrievably crush" him, will accept only what has been "justified before the judgment seat of speculation," and will forever bless "the hour in which I first decided to reflect on myself and my vocation."<sup>95</sup>

Although *Vocation of Man* offers a practical paradigm of Fichte's pedagogy, it should not be construed as his exhaustive defense for the possibility or value of teaching and studying philosophy. A reader of *Vocation of Man* might ask: If a philosophical mentor offers no truths, then how can a mentor teach philosophy to a novice? This question is not only unjust to Fichte and philosophy but also to all teachers and disciplines. Anyone who has made a serious effort to learn any subject would acknowledge that true mastery requires habituation in a practice rather than acquisition of a set of facts, formulae, or definitions. Supposing that philosophy can be taught, this same reader might inquire: If "childlike simplicity" best apprehends

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91. VM, 3 and 26 (GA I/6, 191 and 214). This might seem to be a concern that "love" can address, but it is not, because in raising the issue, the youth has already stepped outside the realm of faith.

92. VM, 27 (GA I/6, 215).

93. Note the exchange of words between the mentor and the novice on pages 60, 64, and 65 of VM (GA I/6, 247–48 and 252). Compare the mentor's claims to Fichte's statement about the teacher's and student's responsibilities in "The Spirit and the Letter within Philosophy" (EPW, 212).

94. VM, 65 (GA I/6, 252).

95. VM, 67, 68, and 115 (GA I/6, 253, 254, and 301).



moral-religious belief, then why teach philosophy to the nonphilosopher?<sup>96</sup> A simple soul might grasp moral-religious belief more readily than many sophisticated minds, but a nonreflective soul does not necessarily recognize the implications of moral-religious belief more completely than a reflective soul, and an undeveloped mind does not necessarily comprehend the means to fulfilling moral-religious obligation more fully than a developed mind.<sup>97</sup> Granting that everyone benefits from accomplishing some philosophical facility, this reader might still demand: If man's vocation "is not merely to know but *to act*," then what justifies the philosopher's single-minded pursuit of philosophical knowledge?<sup>98</sup> As man's vocation is also "to act *according to*" knowledge (including knowledge of the relation between the different goals of all our inquiries and activities), fulfilling this vocation requires a "constant, lasting, and intuitive feeling" for human knowledge and action as a whole, which the philosopher acquires through philosophical activity.<sup>99</sup> In response to each of the reader's questions, Fichte would surely also reply that philosophy develops a pure "love of truth," which "prepares the way for moral goodness" and is itself "already a type of moral goodness."<sup>100</sup> Nonetheless, these particular digressions should not deflect the focus from my main argument about *Vocation of Man*: specifically, Fichte believed he ought to share his philosophical ideas with a wide audience even if the public seemed unwilling or unable to comprehend; he worked to develop widely comprehensible expressions of his ideas after the atheism dispute; and he attempted to use these expressions to communicate more effectively in *Vocation of Man*.

### Conclusion: *Vocation of Man*—An Effort to Communicate

This book, then, is not intended for professional philosophers who will find nothing in it which has not already been presented in other

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96. VM, 111 (GA I/6, 296).

97. Moreover, the clearest simple mind is apt to be clouded and confused by the obscurities of a complex world and thus, in the words of Fichte's former mentor, Immanuel Kant: "Innocence is a splendid thing, only it has the misfortune not to keep very well and to be easily misled" (*Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton [New York: Harper and Row, 1953], 95).

98. VM, 67 (GA I/6, 253).

99. VM, 67 (GA I/6, 253); and "The Spirit and the Letter within Philosophy," EPW, 214.

100. "Stimulating and Increasing the Pure Love of Truth," EPW, 231.

writings by the same author. It is meant to be to be intelligible to all readers who are at all capable of understanding a book. . . . This essay is meant to attract the reader, to engage his interest and powerfully move him from the sensible world to the supersensible. . . . Whether the book succeeds in its intention or not can only be decided by the effect it will have on those readers for whom it was meant, and the author has no voice in this.

—J. G. Fichte, *Vocation of Man*<sup>101</sup>

In the *Vocation of Man*, Fichte approaches the lyrical creativity of the romantic poets (and rivals the rhetorical savoir-faire of the literary strategist Jacobi), but does he communicate effectively? *Vocation of Man* certainly differs from many of Fichte's other early writings. "Divine Governance" was a technical introduction to his still nascent *Religionslehre* that intended to convince a specific, and presumably unprejudiced, audience of transcendental philosophers. In contrast, *Vocation of Man* is a nontechnical overview of his entire *Wissenschaftslehre* (including his newly developed *Religionslehre*) that attempts to engage a general, and obviously biased, audience of critics, literati, and neophytes. *Appeal to the Public* and *Juridical Defense* assaulted the reader with abrasive, gauche, and dense argument whereas *Vocation of Man* entices the reader with allusion, imagery, and metaphor. "Private Letter" and "Concluding Remark" provide laundry lists of definitions and distinctions. *Vocation of Man* divulges intimacies shared between a fantastical youth and a philosophical apparition. Although these stylistic devices enhance Fichte's literary accessibility and persuasive force, do they convey his philosophical position adequately?

In *Vocation of Man*, Fichte sacrifices some conceptual precision to achieve more affable eloquence. Most philosophy teachers make similar concessions to the demands and needs of the student audience. The atheism dispute taught Fichte to appreciate the fancies and frailties of the public audience. *Vocation of Man* might be easy for the public to read and difficult for the philosopher to interpret, but it is intended for "all readers" rather than "professional philosophers." In this small book, Fichte offers a fairly comprehensive synopsis of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, which a diligent beginner can follow without understanding the "technical apparatus" of transcendental philosophy, and which a patient veteran can recognize as consistent

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101. The ellipses are mine. I have condensed this passage from the "Preface" of VM, 1–2 (GA I/6, 189).

with that apparatus.<sup>102</sup> Likewise, he demonstrates both his sustained effort to defend his philosophical position to specific critics and his redoubled motivation to explain it to general readers. Moreover, Fichte provides an unequivocal account of how he understands the relation between morality, belief, and knowledge. Thus, whether easily imprecise or precisely difficult, *Vocation of Man* communicates an intelligible message about Fichte's theoretical and practical commitments.

*Vocation of Man* might not "powerfully move" every reader to the "supersensible world," but Fichte meant for individual readers to freely develop a "philosophical disposition" by working and reflecting not for them to blindly espouse a philosophical dogma by memorizing and repeating "a few fine phrases."<sup>103</sup> Moreover, despite its faults, Fichte's little book continues to "attract" and "engage" readers after two centuries. Most importantly, the work represents the author's sincere endeavor to explain theoretically profound ideas about practically significant issues to individual readers at varied levels of intellectual and ethical development.<sup>104</sup> Thus, whether powerfully moving or just attractively engaging, *Vocation of Man* is a philosophically unique, morally earnest, and pedagogically admirable effort to communicate.

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102. VM, 1 (GA I/6, 189).

103. VM, 1–2 (GA I/6, 189–90).

104. VM, 1 (GA I/6, 189).

## “Interest”

### An Overlooked Protagonist in Book I of Fichte’s *Bestimmung des Menschen*

MÁRIO JORGE DE CARVALHO

The mention of “interest” as the protagonist in Fichte’s *Bestimmung des Menschen* may sound a trifle odd, but perhaps it is *not as absurd as it might seem*.

Firstly, “interest” is to be understood in the sense of Kant’s concept of “*Interesse*” (*praktisches Interesse*, *theoretisches Interesse*, etc.). We cannot address this issue in detail here. So let it suffice to say that Kant’s concept of *Interesse* denotes *non-neutrality*, the *opposite of indifference*—or rather, a particular kind of non-neutrality.

Many accounts of what Kant calls consciousness or appearance (and indeed most interpretations of Kant’s own account of consciousness) are faulty precisely because they understand the *medium* in which consciousness and its objects take place as if it were *completely neutral*. On the one hand, the so-called subject seems to be constituted in such a way that it is aware of its objects, but nevertheless indifferent both to their presence and to their content, and remains entirely unconcerned about which kind of objects or “contents” present themselves, about whether or not it is able to reach an adequate understanding of its own situation and its possibilities, etc. In short, the so-called subject does not seem to have any “program” or “agenda,” nor does it seem to have any kind of inclinations or demands

concerning itself and the contents of consciousness. On the other hand, the so-called object seems to be constituted in such a way that it has nothing to do with any such “program” or “agenda,” and that it is not essentially related to inclinations or demands on the part of the subject. In short, the contents of consciousness are described as if they were simply there, as if they did not *concern* the subject, as if they had absolutely no functions to perform, and were not required to meet any subject-related *needs* or *demands*. In a word, consciousness is described as if *nothing were at stake in it*.

But Kant emphasizes that the medium in which consciousness and its objects take place is completely steeped in *nonindifference* or *non-neutrality*, and that at any rate human consciousness is essentially a “place” *where there is something at stake*, and indeed so that the fact that there is something at stake in it (and the issues that are at stake in it) form a fundamental component of consciousness and an essential trait of all its moments. Now, this is what Kant’s concept of *Interesse* is all about. Consciousness (or at any rate human consciousness) has, as it were, its own “agenda” of needs, questions, and tasks—and that the subject (*viz.*, reason) is not a *tabula rasa* has also to do with the fact that it has its own “agenda” of needs, questions, and tasks. In other words, the so-called subject has its own “demands.” And what appears to the subject (the so-called object) faces these demands (*viz.*, these questions and needs), which it is either able or unable to meet (to answer, to fulfil), so that it proves to be *satisfactory* or *unsatisfactory*. In other words, according to Kant, consciousness is essentially *after something*, and this forms what we may describe as a particular kind of “gravity” or a particular kind of surrounding and pervading “atmosphere”—the “atmosphere” of *interest* (the “atmosphere” of *being after something*), with the result that everything in the field of consciousness is subject to the corresponding form of “atmospheric pressure.”

In order to understand the full implications of Kant’s account of “interest,” it is important to keep a few points in mind. First, “interest” is by no means a simple phenomenon. It encompasses many different facets, a multiplicity of disparate needs, questions, and tasks, ranging from what one may call cognitive needs and tasks (*viz.*, a cognitive “agenda”) to a variety of *noncognitive* needs, tasks, and inclinations. In other words, what is at stake in consciousness is not one single thing, but rather a “bundle” of *different issues* that are intricately intertwined. “Interest” seems to be anything but *unidirectional*, it goes in *different directions*, and consciousness is not subject only to one, but to a plurality of *divergent*, sometimes *conflicting* pressures. If “interest” does indeed form a particular kind of “atmosphere” that pervades consciousness, this “atmosphere” is complex, multilayered, and what is more, not entirely free of tensions and contradictions. Sec-

ondly, the whole point in Kant's account of "interest" is precisely that it is not something merely *superadded* to consciousness, as though consciousness (with all its fundamental components—both the so-called subject and the so-called object, etc.) were constituted separately, prior to and independently of any "interest" whatsoever, and "interest" were only adventitious and accessory. As Kant points out, the reverse is true. Human consciousness is inseparable from "interest": "interest" is always already there as a major, intrinsic, and decisive component of consciousness. Perhaps there is such a thing as an absolutely *uninterested* consciousness. But it is something altogether different from anything we know, and as a matter of fact we are perfectly unable to form any adequate idea of it. In our case, consciousness is constituted in such a way that it entails "interest" and is from the outset *interested to the core*. Thirdly, the concept of "interest" does not denote only *vague* inclinations, but also the very opposite. In this respect the word Kant used may be somewhat misleading, since it will easily suggest only a relatively low level of intensity. To be sure, Kant's concept of "interest" denotes all forms of non-neutrality, including also those that are weak and vague. But the point is precisely that human consciousness is far from being subject only to this kind of less intense inclination. Human consciousness may well have tasks that it would only vaguely care to fulfill, needs that it would only vaguely want to satisfy, questions that it would only vaguely like to see answered. But, in point of fact, it is also subject to far more radical forms of non-neutrality. For there is a core of vital, pressing needs, the satisfaction of which seems to be absolutely indispensable; there is a core of vital tasks that seem to be absolutely imperative; there is a core of essential questions, the answer to which is something one cannot do without. And this very core of vital and absolutely pressing needs, tasks and questions is "interest" *kat'exochen*: this is precisely what Kant's concept of "interest" chiefly stands for.

Now, all this poses a series of crucial questions that Kant asked and tried to answer. First, What is, after all, the origin of non-neutrality or "interest" in the Kantian sense—how does it arise, where does it stem from, how is it constituted: What makes consciousness an *interested* consciousness at all? Secondly, What is the *nature* and the *direction* of the particular kind of non-neutrality or "interest" that is at work in human consciousness? Is it a random conglomeration of disparate elements, each of them with its own specific properties and condition, so that there is no coherent nexus between them? Or can all its different components be traced back to a common principle (or at least to a set of organizing principles), so that there is a thread running through all the diversity and complexity of the different forms of non-neutrality that can be found in us? This question is closely

connected to another one, namely: Is non-neutrality, “interest,” a realm of ever-changing impulses, urges, drives, or is there a *core* of permanent, inherent, invariable non-neutrality or “interest” (a core of absolutely essential needs, tasks, and questions) that is inscribed in the very nature of human consciousness, so that it presides over each and every moment of our conscious life? A thorough analysis of Kant’s discussion of *theoretical* and *practical interest*, their nature and structure, the role they play (or do not play) in human consciousness, shows that the clarification of these problems is what that discussion is all about. Which brings us to the *third* crucial question that Kant raised and tried to answer: If human consciousness is characterized by the fact that there is always something at stake in it, in the end, what is it (what is the concrete issue or the concrete set of issues) that is at stake in human consciousness—*what is it that human consciousness is after?* In other words, if there is indeed a *fundamental core* of *inherent, invariable “interest,”* that is part and parcel of our very nature, *which concrete needs, tasks, and questions form this fundamental core?* How are they related to each other? And how are they related to the *other* concrete needs, tasks and questions (i.e., how are they related to the *changeable, variable* part, viz., to the *whole* realm of nonindifference or “interest,” of which they form the core)?

Now, it is perfectly plain that an examination of these questions would go far beyond the scope of this paper. And indeed one may well ask: What does all this have to do with Fichte and in particular with the *Bestimmung des Menschen*? For there seems to be scarcely any mention of the concept of “interest” in the *BM*,<sup>1</sup> and this plain fact should be more than enough to rule out the possibility of it playing any significant role in this work. There are, of course, other writings where Fichte addresses these issues.<sup>2</sup>

1. See SW II, 196–97, 231, 253, 255 (GA I/6), 213f., 240, 257, 258f. Unless otherwise specified, all quotes are from the *BM*.

2. Let it suffice to mention, for example, the following: *Versuch einer Kritik aller Offenbarung*, GA I/1, 24f., 34ff., 55ff., 116f., 143ff.; *Beiträge zur Berichtigung des Urteils des Publikums*, SW VI, 52f., 64f. (GA I/1, 213f., 223f.); *Rezension Creuzer*, GA I/2, 7; *Rezension Gebhard*, GA I/2, 23; *Zur Rezension Gebhard*, GA II/2, 274f.; *Versuch eines erklärenden Auszugs aus Kants Kritik der Urteilskraft*, GA II/1, 350f.; *Über Belebung und Erhöhung des reinen Interesse für Wahrheit*, SW VIII, 342–52 (GA I/3, 83–90); *Practische Philosophie*, GA II/3, 196; *Vorlesungen über Platners Aphorismen*, GA II/4, 42ff., 48, 112; *Vorlesungen über die Moral*, SS 1796, GA IV/1, 47ff., 61ff., 65f., 80f., 99, 132; *Erste Einleitung in die Wissenschaftslehre*, SW I, 433f.; *Zweite Einleitung in die Wissenschaftslehre*, SW I, 466, GA I/4, 219; *Vorlesungen über Logik und Metaphysik* SS 1797, GA IV/1, 179f., 242f.; SS, SW IV, 25f., 143ff., (GA I/5, 43, 135ff.); *Ascetik oder Anhang zur Moral*, SW XI, 139ff. (GA I/5, 73ff.); *WLn[m]KJ*, GA IV/3, 324, 326, 328, 335; *Neue Bearbeitung der W.L.*, GA II/5, 341; *Logik*, Erlangen, 1805, GA II/9, 87; *Vorarbeiten zur Anweisung zum seligen Leben*, GA II/9, 320f.; *Anweisung zum seligen Leben*, SW V, 402, 440, 502f. (GA I/9, 55f., 86f., 136f.).

Scattered through all these and other writings are several important clues about Fichte's own analysis of "interest" and about his views on the issues adumbrated above. At any rate, the question, "What does Fichte make of Kant's doctrine of *Interesse*? or rather, "What is Fichte's own doctrine of *Interesse*?" is worth considering.<sup>3</sup> Because the relevant clues are scattered so widely throughout the *corpus fichteianum*, in order to answer this question one has to collect the pieces of what could be described as a jigsaw puzzle and try to fit them together. It is certainly not an easy task, but it can be well worth the effort, for on the one hand what is at stake here are crucial issues, about which Fichte's views may prove to be enlightening, and on the other hand, the question of "interest" (viz., the whole complex of problems connected with it) is absolutely central to Fichte's philosophy, so that any interpretation that does not tackle this question misses a decisive point and leaves a blind spot right in the center of Fichte's philosophical understanding of the nature of consciousness and its objects.

Even if we accept this view, however, the problem still remains: What has all this to do with the BM? If the concept of "interest" is as good as absent from this work, the only possible explanation appears to be that it simply does not play any significant role in the BM—and this in turn seems to mean that the question of "interest" (viz., the whole complex of problems connected with it) is not that central to Fichte's philosophy after all.

It may be tempting to jump to this conclusion. Yet it is also ill-judged and misleading. For even if the BM includes only very few *explicit* mentions of "interest," the whole complex of problems connected with this concept may still play a key role in the book—not *explicitly*, of course, but *in re*. And in fact, on closer inspection it turns out that the theme and the "plot" of the BM have everything to do with the phenomenon of *interested* consciousness. On the one hand, the BM depicts a *quest* or *pursuit* of some kind. But the very fact that there is a *quest* or *pursuit* shows that we are not dealing with a consciousness that is devoid of all urge, thrust, or drive, which knows neither attachment nor needs. The quest is motivated by something; it is triggered and fueled by *nonindifference* or *non-neutrality*, and indeed so much so that without "interest" (in the aforesaid sense) the whole quest or search staged by Fichte in the BM for performance in the mind of the reader would be completely pointless. In short, the truth of

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3. For an overview of the role played by the concept of interest in the second half of the eighteenth and in the first half of the nineteenth centuries, see for example H. M. Schmidinger, *Das Problem des Interesses und die Philosophie Sören Kierkegaards* (Freiburg/ München: Alber, 1983)—on Fichte, see in particular 138–60. Schmidinger's survey is far from being entirely satisfactory and complete, but it provides a general outline of some main developments.



the matter is that there is something *at stake* in the BM—and that what is *at stake* in the BM is precisely that which, according to Fichte, is at stake in the very nature of human consciousness as such (i.e., in *every* human consciousness). But this is not all. For, on the other hand, the BM explores several hypotheses or possible solutions, some of which prove unsatisfactory and are abandoned *precisely because they do not answer some of the subject's questions, and/or do not meet some of the subject's needs*, while other hypotheses or possible solutions are conceived and explored *in the hope that they may answer those very questions and meet those very needs*. In other words, the collation between what is found in the course of the search depicted by Fichte and a whole “program” or “agenda” of needs, tasks, and questions, in virtue of which human consciousness *is after something*, plays a pivotal role in the development of the BM. “Interest” in this sense (viz., satisfaction or lack of satisfaction of “interest”) is far more than just a condition of possibility of the quest staged by Fichte in the BM, and it does not just trigger and fuel this quest: “interest” is, as it were, the driving force behind all its major developments. In the end, the whole plot of the BM is a *plot of “interest”*—a plot in which this fundamental structure (nonindifference: a “program” or “agenda” of needs, tasks, and questions—the fact that human consciousness of its very nature *is after something* and *whatever it is that it is after*) plays a major role and is, in a manner of speaking, one of the “main characters.” But this is still not enough and does not do entire justice to the role played by “interest” in the BM. For the central “character” in the BM is an *interested* consciousness, the *interested* I—and the fact that it is *interested*, to wit, the concrete way in which consciousness or the I is *interested* is the fundamental trait around which everything revolves (the trait without which the I would be simply unable to play the role it is assigned to). That is why I would venture to say that “interest” in the aforesaid sense is not just one of the main characters, but rather *the* main character, the very *protagonist* in the BM.

But if this view is correct, this means that the *very development of the quest or search* staged by Fichte in the BM reveals the underlying structure of “interest” (the subject’s “agenda” of questions and needs, its composition, etc.), and contains a kind of survey of this fundamental structure. To be sure, this survey is only an indirect one, in the sense that the BM does not take the form of a systematic examination of “interest,” of its composition (or, to *use a well-known metaphor*, it does not describe *ex professo* the *morphology* and *physiology* of “interest” as such). The BM deals with problems prompted by “interest” and tries to solve them. But in doing so it brings out the underlying structure of “interest” that is at work in these

problems, and makes it transparent, so that the different components of the subject's "agenda" of needs, tasks, and questions shine through, as it were, and stand out clearly. Now, it goes without saying that an analysis of the question of "interest" in the *BM* considers only a relatively small part of the above mentioned jigsaw puzzle of scattered pieces the *corpus fichteanum* provides us with concerning this question. And this is even truer for an analysis that does not go beyond the end of Book I. Such an analysis is therefore nothing more than a first step toward putting the puzzle together. Furthermore, as will become apparent, an examination of the *BM* does not enable us to answer some of the questions adumbrated in these preliminary remarks. And what is more, it even fails to address some of them, because they seem to be completely absent from the *BM*. In other words, a thorough analysis of Fichte's own doctrine of *Interesse* would certainly require far more than the brief sketch and the very limited account presented in this paper. My hope is that this first glimpse into part of the jigsaw puzzle I have been talking about provides a sense of the importance of the whole.

So much for the preliminary observations about the task ahead. Let us now proceed *in medias res*.

From the very beginning of Book I the *BM* is all about nonindifference. Fichte draws a contrast between our knowledge of the world around us and our knowledge of ourselves and our vocation. As he points out, somewhere down the road we find ourselves at a point where we seem to know a great deal of the world around us, but not very much about ourselves and our "vocation." But the point is that we seem to know a great deal of the world around us because we have "made enough of an effort and taken sufficient care in acquiring this knowledge."<sup>4</sup>

Let us consider this in a little more detail. First of all, what this means is that we do not just happen to have this knowledge of the world around us. We have employed sufficient labor and care in the acquisition of it precisely because we have a *nonindifferent* relation to this knowledge, that is, because it is *something we cannot do without*. In other words, this knowledge is not simply there. Its presence—our possession of it—*satisfies a need*. In short, what characterizes us is not only the knowledge we seem to have of the world around us, but what we may call a certain amount of *Wissenwollen*: a *quantum* of desire for knowledge or need for knowledge. Secondly, Fichte is not speaking of an abstract *Wissenwollen*, but of a

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4. SW II, 169 (GA I/6, 191). I have followed P. Preuss's translation (VM) with minor changes. But in some cases I found the translation offered by W. Smith, *The Popular Works of Johann Gottlieb Fichte* (London: Trübner & Co, 1889<sup>4</sup>), 321–478, to be more helpful.

concrete “cognitive program” or “cognitive agenda.” For (1) he emphasizes the labor and care we employ in the acquisition of the knowledge of the world around us, that is, a *specifically oriented* need for knowledge: the need for a knowledge *of the world around us* and in particular *of that part of the world that surrounds us*; and (2) Fichte also emphasizes that this “cognitive program” or “agenda” includes a set of criteria the knowledge of the world around us is required to meet in order to be effective and thereby satisfy our need for it. In other words, the need we have for knowledge of the world around us includes certain requirements concerning the *form* of this knowledge, its accuracy, and the validity of the convictions resulting from it. On the one hand, as Fichte points out, the need for knowledge is tantamount to a need for certainty: we must be sure that “it is so and not otherwise,” without the possibility of doubt. Certainty is a *condicio sine qua non* of knowledge itself. On the other hand, this fundamental formal requirement entails other formal requirements of a derived nature: for (1) we need some *criteria that tell us when we can be certain*—criteria that all our convictions about the world around us are required to meet (the first paragraph of Book I mentions some of them, and describes our perception of the world around us as an *incessant effort* to meet these criteria, and *to check their fulfillment*, so that it is the very opposite of the mere presence of certain contents that simply impose themselves upon us); and (2) certainty cannot be achieved without satisfying a set of necessary requirements—Fichte underlines, in particular, the following: if knowledge is to be certain, I must *find it out myself*, for all “secondhand knowledge” has feet of clay. In other words, besides having a “cognitive agenda” in the sense that it requires knowledge of at least some specific *objects or domains of objects*, our consciousness has a “cognitive agenda” also in the sense that its very need for knowledge entails a specific agenda concerning the *formal* requirements of knowledge itself—what we can call a *formal* “cognitive agenda.”

But the first paragraph of Book I provides a further important clue concerning “interest” and the role it plays in our consciousness. For, as Fichte points out, our need for knowledge of the world around us (*viz.*, our need for certainty about it) has to do with the fact that at every moment we must “stake” our “existence and well-being on the validity of our convictions” about the world around us—and this is precisely the reason why we need nothing less than knowledge, to wit, nothing less than certainty, and can’t afford the lack of it.<sup>5</sup> In other words, besides pointing to the role

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5. SW II, 169 (GA I/6, 191).

played by a "cognitive agenda," Fichte also emphasizes a second pivotal component of non-neutrality, or nonindifference: the fact that we are by no means indifferent toward *our own existence and wellbeing*, that is, the fact that we are, in a manner of speaking, interested in *ourselves*—in our *life and welfare*. And this "interest in ourselves" is either a catalyst of the "cognitive agenda" regarding the world around us or in fact the very source of all our need for knowledge of it (of the whole "cognitive agenda" we have in this regard).

But in the beginning of Book I the main point is the contrast between our knowledge of the world around us and our knowledge of "ourselves and our vocation"—or, as Fichte also puts it, our knowledge of the answer to the question, "What am I myself, and what is my vocation?" (the answer that enables me to know "what I am, and what I shall be": "*was ich selbst bin, und was ich seyn werde*").<sup>6</sup> This is not the place to analyze the concept of "vocation." So let it suffice to say that the latter form of knowledge concerns nothing less than *what (or who) I am and the whole of my possible future* (what is *possible* for me, *what I may hope for, what I am entitled to or justified in desiring*). In a word, Fichte is speaking of that form of knowledge that enables me to understand *what life is about, what is at stake in it* (i.e., the specific kind of knowledge that enables me to know *what really matters to me, what I am or should be seeking*—and this means precisely the *knowledge of nonindifference: the fundamental knowledge of interest itself*). Now, according to Fichte, there is a contrast because in this case we find the very opposite of the exacting care with which we acquire our knowledge of the world around us. For (1) it is long since we have been completely instructed upon these points (*what I am and shall be*, my "vocation," my *fundamental "interest"*); the matter seems to be absolutely settled, and there is nothing of the incessant effort (the continuous examination, etc.) that characterizes the acquisition of our knowledge of the world around us; (2) "[T]his instruction was bestowed on us before we felt any want for it," or, as he also puts it, "[W]e were given an answer before we had raised a question."<sup>7</sup> In other words, not only is there no effort, no comparison, no testing, no doubts, no finding out for ourselves, but in fact there *never was* any such thing; we have made no effort at all and taken absolutely no care in acquiring this knowledge of our "vocation": "[W]ithout examination and

5. SW II, 169 (GA I/6, 191).

6. SW II, 171 (GA I/6, 192). All quotations retain the spelling of the original in the GA.

7. SW II, 170 (GA I/6, 191).

without taking any interest I just let things come as they might,” and have followed mainly what other people claim to know about it, so that my knowledge of these matters is in fact nothing but a secondhand knowledge with feet of clay.<sup>8</sup> Or, as it is perhaps more accurate to say, all our knowledge of these matters has the form of an automatic *Sichverlassen*—we just *rely* on certain *unchecked* and *uncontrolled* assumptions.<sup>9</sup> To sum up, according to Fichte, we are constituted in such a way that at some point each one of us can find out the following: “So far . . . while I investigated trivial things myself with exacting care, I have depended on the trustworthiness and care of strangers in matters of the highest importance.”<sup>10</sup>

Let us see what this all means. First, it means that, according to Fichte, not all our knowledge is of the world around us. There is also some knowledge of “what we are and shall be,” some knowledge of our “vocation,” some knowledge of what life is about and what is at stake in it—or at least some knowledge *claim* regarding these matters. To be sure, in the first paragraphs of Book I Fichte points out that because my convictions on this issue have such feet of clay, “I cannot truly say that I possess even the slightest knowledge of my vocation.”<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, he also emphasizes that each of us is persuaded that he possesses some real knowledge “of what I am and shall be.” In other words, the point is not that we make no knowledge claim at all with respect to these matters, but that while we make knowledge claims *both* regarding the world around us *and* regarding “what we are and shall be,” there is a considerable difference between the former and the latter, because regarding the former we take care and make a significant effort, but regarding the latter there seems to be nothing but utter “carelessness.” Now, the question is: Does this “carelessness” show that we have an altogether *indifferent* relation to the knowledge of “what we are and shall be,” so that each of us is persuaded that he possesses this knowledge, but our possession of it does not satisfy any *need* whatsoever? Is it so that we have absolutely no need or desire for any knowledge of this kind, and that all our *Wissenwollen*, all our need for knowledge is directed toward the world around us? In other words, does this “carelessness” show (1) that we have no specifically oriented need for any knowledge of “what I am and shall be” or of our “vocation”? and (2) the complete absence of

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8. Ibid.

9. Cf. SW II, 170 (GA I/6, 192).

10. Ibid.

11. Ibid.

any "cognitive program" concerning this kind of knowledge—no *formal requirements*, no *formal* "cognitive agenda" (absolutely no urge for certainty, etc.) regarding this issue?

Let us begin with the second question. Basically, Fichte does not deny that, when we are persuaded that we know what he calls our "vocation," we take this knowledge to be certain and beyond all doubt. As a matter of fact, each of us seems to know with absolute certainty "what he is and shall be," what is at stake in his life, etc. According to Fichte, the problem is that this supposedly certain knowledge is unfounded and groundless. This, of course, means that there is some *carelessness* involved in the acquisition and acceptance of this kind of certainty (and that, if we do indeed have some *need* or *desire* for knowledge of our "vocation," this need or desire must be constituted in such a way that it is not incompatible with such carelessness). But, having said that, it must also be kept in mind that the reason why we usually have no need to acquire any knowledge of "what we are and shall be" (what life is about, etc.) is precisely *because we are convinced that we already have this knowledge*, because the knowledge we have seems to be beyond all doubt—and there simply is no need to acquire what one already possesses. In short, the fact that we carelessly accept unfounded beliefs concerning "what we are and shall be," or our "vocation," does not prove that there is absolutely no "cognitive program" in this regard and that we do not have any *desire* or *need* for knowledge about these matters.

But the question still remains: Do we have a "cognitive program" with regard to "what we are and shall be"? And do we have any need for this kind of knowledge? What do the first paragraphs of Book I say on this subject? The answer is very clear. For Fichte characterizes the knowledge of the world around us (that very knowledge that we try to acquire with exacting care) as "knowledge of *trivial things*," and on the other hand he speaks of the knowledge of our "vocation" (the one we usually do not care to acquire) as "a matter of *the highest importance*."<sup>12</sup> In other words, the starting point of the BM is precisely the insight that the degree of our effort to acquire these two kinds of knowledge does not match the degree of their *importance*—and indeed, so much so that the one is in *inverse ratio* to the other.

Now, first of all, any difference between degrees of importance (and in particular the difference between what Fichte calls "trivial things" and "matters of the highest importance") involves "interest" (*nonindifference*,

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12. Cf. Ibid.: *das minderwichtige [sic] / das Wichtigste, sc., die höchsten Angelegenheiten*.

*non-neutrality*) and is not possible without it. Here again, it becomes apparent that “interest” plays a key role in the starting point of Fichte’s analysis. But when Fichte says that knowledge of “what I am and shall be” is of the highest importance, this means precisely that we are *not altogether indifferent* toward it—and what is more, it also means the following: if knowledge of the world around us is knowledge of comparatively *less important* things, and we cannot do without it, then knowledge of matters of the *highest importance* is a fortiori knowledge *we need and cannot do without*. In other words, according to Fichte, there is no less need for knowledge of “what I am and shall be” (what life is about, etc.) than for knowledge of the world around us. In fact, quite the reverse; if anything, there is *more need* for the former than for the latter.

In the beginning of Book I Fichte does not explain why this is so. But this much is clear: the fact that knowledge of “what I am and shall be” is of the highest importance has nothing to do with what Kant calls *theoretisches Interesse* and with any order of priority that may prevail in the realm of that particular kind of nonindifference. Fichte’s description suggests unequivocally that knowledge of “what I am and shall be” is of the highest importance for no other reason than the fact that we are, as stated above, deeply interested in *ourselves*, and that this kind of knowledge is *particularly indispensable* and has some sort of *priority* from the point of view of our interest in *ourselves*. And, on the other hand, even if we cannot discuss this matter in detail here, what we have seen concerning Fichte’s understanding of “vocation” and knowledge of our “vocation” enables us to identify at least one essential aspect that explains this priority. As Fichte points out, our need for knowledge of the world around us stems from the fact that at every moment we must “stake” our “existence and well-being on the validity of our convictions” about it. But, if this is so, our whole understanding of what we must pursue or avoid in the world around us is and must be guided by a fundamental understanding of *where our interest lies*, that is, by a certain understanding of *what we are*, and *what is at stake in life*. In other words, everything depends on a fundamental knowledge of our “interest”—or, as Fichte says, of our “vocation.” Precisely because we are interested in ourselves, it is of vital importance that we understand what our interest really is; it is of vital importance that we really know what we are, and what is at stake in our existence: it is of vital importance that we “do not get it wrong,” and that our knowledge claims regarding what we are and what life is about are not unfounded—because otherwise everything (including our understanding of how the world around us can affect us) may be completely wrong. To sum up, if, as Fichte tries to show, our interest in

ourselves creates some need for knowledge, the knowledge it requires is first and foremost knowledge of "what I am and shall be," knowledge of what is at stake in life: knowledge of my "vocation." In the framework of our interest in ourselves this is not the only knowledge we need, but it surely is the most important, decisive, and necessary knowledge of all.

But if this is so, the very fact that we cannot do without some knowledge of ourselves and our "vocation" entails what we have called a "cognitive agenda" or "cognitive program" concerning this kind of knowledge. In other words, the need we have for knowledge of our "vocation" (that which makes of it a matter of the highest importance) imposes certain requirements concerning the *form* of this knowledge, its accuracy, and the validity of the convictions resulting from it. For, if there is a need for a certain kind of knowledge (and a fortiori if there is a *strong* need for it, and we simply *cannot do without* the knowledge in question) this need is *eo ipso* also a need for the complete fulfillment of all formal requirements without which our convictions cannot qualify as knowledge. The knowledge of our vocation must be "*real* knowledge," it cannot be secondhand, it cannot have feet of clay (N.B., not because of any pure interest in knowledge in itself, sc., for knowledge's sake, but because of our interest in *ourselves* and the need for knowledge that it entails). And the same holds for certainty, that is, for what we have called the urge for certainty. The need for knowledge of our "vocation" is *eo ipso* a need for absolutely *certain* knowledge of it. We must be sure "it is so and not otherwise," without the possibility of doubt. This does not mean, of course, that we cannot be mistaken about the fulfillment of all these formal requirements—Fichte points out precisely that we normally are, and that all our usual knowledge claims regarding this second kind of knowledge are completely groundless. But we are mistaken about the fulfillment of these requirements precisely because they "are there," and constantly play a significant role. For not only are we usually convinced that our knowledge of what we are (of what is at stake in life) is *real* knowledge (that things cannot be otherwise, etc.), but this supposedly certain knowledge constantly fulfills a need for certainty, that is, a need for the *formal perfection* without which there is no knowledge at all (and without which we would therefore lack the one thing we constantly need about this crucial issue).

Now, that this is so—that we are anything but indifferent to this second kind of knowledge, that each of us cannot do without knowledge of "what I am and shall be"—is shown precisely by the fact that, according to Fichte, if and when we find out that there is a serious flaw in our supposed knowledge of our "vocation," that is, if and when we become



aware that in fact we have *no true knowledge* of it, we cannot just leave it like that and do nothing about it. This is what Fichte points out when in the first paragraphs of Book I he depicts how the I reacts to the discovery that it has no real knowledge of its “vocation”: “I don’t want this to be so any longer . . . I will investigate *for myself*.”<sup>13</sup> Now, it must be kept in mind that Fichte does not intend this as a reaction that some people have while others do not. What he means is nothing less than the following: if and when we realize that there is a critical shortcoming in our knowledge of our “vocation,” and that we therefore do not *know* “what we are and shall be,” so that what is at stake in life remains completely undetermined (and it cannot be excluded that “we are and shall be” means something completely different from what we usually think)—if and when we realize this, we cannot help taking the matter in hand, that is, we cannot help striving to overcome this flaw and attain real knowledge of our “vocation.” In other words, we are constituted in such a way that *we cannot accept a crucial flaw in our knowledge of “what we are and shall be”* (a crucial failure in the fulfillment of formal cognitive requirements, the nonobservance of which radically undermines and disqualifies any knowledge claims). We cannot accept this cognitive flaw—I insist—not because we pursue knowledge for knowledge’s sake, but chiefly because we are not indifferent toward ourselves and—for the sake of our interest in ourselves—need to *know* (*really to know*) what we are, what is at stake in life, etc.

If it were not for this derived, self-related, constitutive need for knowledge, it would be a matter of utter indifference whether we do or do not have any knowledge of our “vocation,” and the fact that, as the first paragraphs of Book I try to show, the main character depicted in the *BM*—the I—does not possess any such knowledge, would not affect it in the least. In other words, if it were not for “interest,” the investigation staged by Fichte in the *BM* would not even be launched—the whole thing would end even before it started. And it becomes more and more apparent that “interest”—viz., (1) the derived, self-related, constitutive need for knowledge (both for knowledge of the world around us and for knowledge of our “vocation”), (2) the need for the fulfillment of the *formal requirements* of knowledge, which is entailed in (1) and derives from it, and (3) the underlying, fundamental principle (namely *interest in ourselves, self-interest*) that seems to be the driving force of it all—is indeed that upon which everything depends and around which everything revolves, so that it is no exaggeration if we say that it is the protagonist of the *BM*.

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13. SW II, 170–71 (GA I/6, 192).

But this is not all. As a matter of fact, the BM is so much about "interest" that Fichte does not start his investigation without mentioning another interest-related aspect that seems to be of some importance. He writes: "It could be that I will find in myself secret wishes about how the investigation may end and an inclination to give preference to certain assertions; if so, I shall forget and deny this inclination and grant it no influence on the direction of my thoughts. I want to go to work with rigor and care and accept any result honestly. What I find to be true, whatever it may be, I shall welcome. I want to know. . . . And should this by any chance not be possible, then I want at least to know that it is not possible. And I will submit even to this result of the investigation, should it disclose itself to me as the truth."<sup>14</sup> Let us consider this in a little more detail.

First of all, Fichte seems to be mentioning a third pivotal component of nonindifference that also characterizes the I, namely, wishes about how the investigation may end, preferences concerning the possible answers, partial leaning toward certain conclusions. We could have interest in ourselves, and this interest could create some need for knowledge (both of our "vocation" and of the world around us), but in such a way that we were only interested in knowing "where we stand," "where we are at," and had absolutely *no preferences, no inclinations*—just a "neutral" need for knowledge of our condition (sc., of our situation). But Fichte points out that that may not be the case. Beyond having an interest in ourselves that creates a vital need for knowledge, we are constituted in such a way that we *prefer certain possibilities over others* (or rather, prefer certain possibilities *and tend to avoid others*). This particular kind of non-neutrality has to do with our interest in ourselves. Our interest in ourselves is constituted in such a way that we *lean toward some forms of being*, and have some kind of "*project*" *for ourselves*. We are *after something* also in this third sense. In particular with regard to our "vocation" ("what I am and shall be," "what is at stake in life," etc.), each of us is constitutively under the pressure of a complex constellation of very marked, deeply rooted forms of (let me paraphrase Bartleby's famous refrain) "I would rather"s and "I would rather not"s. In other words, we are constituted in such a way that we would definitely prefer to be of such and such a nature, that we would definitely prefer life to be like this and not like that, etc. The I is not only committed to itself. It is also committed to its deeply ingrained inclinations, demands, purposes, and revulsions; it cannot help being affected by them. And, what is more, as Fichte points out (not in the beginning, but toward the end of

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14. SW II, 171 (GA I/6, 192).

Book I), this particular kind of non-neutrality which is at work in us is so powerful that it is even able to *influence and shape our convictions*—i.e., it is so strong that it even carries a *suggestion of truth*, and moves us to assume that things really are as they should be, if our wishes, inclinations, etc. are to be fulfilled. In other words, as the Latin phrase goes, *facile credimus quod volumus*—or, as Fichte puts it, our inclinations can lead us to turn a mere possibility into a conviction (“*eine Meinung, die nichts für sich hat, als ihre eigne Denkbarkeit und die Unerweislichkeit ihres Gegentheils, bis zur Ueberzeugung zu ergänzen*”).<sup>15</sup> In short, inclinations can assume the form of knowledge (N.B., of *merely apparent knowledge*), so that what appears to be knowledge may in fact be nothing but *inclination in disguise*.

But, secondly, having said that, Fichte adds an important remark concerning the connection between all this and our need for *knowledge*. His words amount to saying that, no matter how strong and ingrained our inclinations and revulsions are, our interest in ourselves entails a need for nothing less than *real knowledge* or *truth*.<sup>16</sup> Here again, it must be kept in mind that, in Fichte’s view, this does not hold only for some people and not for others. One may, of course, fall prey to “inclinations in disguise,” that is, to *merely apparent knowledge*, but only as long as one is not aware of their nature and remains falsely convinced of the validity of their knowledge claims. Precisely because we are interested in ourselves, “inclinations in disguise,” or merely apparent knowledge, are not enough for us: we do not want our convictions to be mere inclinations in disguise, we do not want our knowledge to be merely apparent, we do not want to be mistaken either about the world around us or about our “vocation” (what we are, what life is about, etc.). To sum up, precisely because we are interested in ourselves, what we need is *real knowledge* of our situation. Our interest in ourselves is intrinsically connected with the idea of knowledge; it creates, as we have said, an irreducible need to *know* (N.B., a need to know only what involves and affects us and is relevant in regard to our interest in ourselves), so that even our drives and inclinations demand *real* and *not* merely illusory satisfaction. And this cognitive component of our “interest” is so strong that, as Fichte points out, if knowledge of our situation proves to be impossible—and in particular, if knowledge of our “vocation” (of “what I am and shall be,” of what is at stake in life, etc.) proves to

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15. Cf. SW II, 197 (GA I/6, 213).

16. See SW II, 171 (GA I/6, 192), and SW II, 191 (GA I/6, 208).

be impossible, then we want *at least to know that this is the case*—i.e., we prefer this absolutely *minimal* knowledge to nothing.<sup>17</sup>

In order to create contrast and enhance the specific traits of the complex form of "interest" Fichte is talking about (that very form of "interest" that is the main character in the BM), let us consider two forms of *unidirectional*, totally *unconditioned* interest: pure, unmingled, unconditioned interest in *knowledge just for knowledge's sake*, and pure, unmingled, unconditioned interest in *oneself* and in particular in *one's drives, inclinations*, etc. The latter would correspond to something like a completely uncontrolled indulgence of one's own appetites and desires, regardless of whether their satisfaction is *real or illusory*, regardless of any *knowledge claim* or *cognitive concern*, regardless of whether such a satisfaction is *or is not what life is about*, etc. The former would have nothing to do with interest in oneself, to wit, for one's desires, inclinations, or drives: its only concern would be the acquisition of knowledge and the pursuit of truth for its own sake. Now, what Fichte is talking about is a form of "interest" that differs considerably from these two with respect to its properties. This third form of interest has everything to do with an *interest in ourselves* and in our preferences, desires, and inclinations, drives, etc. But it is constituted in such a way that the interest in ourselves, in our desires and inclinations, etc. is intrinsically connected with, bound to, and limited by an *interest in knowledge and the attainment of truth*. Or, to be more precise, our interest in ourselves is constituted in such a way that it *creates an interest in knowledge* (with all its requirements and implications) and *makes itself dependent on it*. On the other hand, our share of interest in knowledge and the attainment of truth is intrinsically connected with, bound to, and limited by our interest in ourselves, in our desires and inclinations, etc. What is more, our interest in knowledge is *constituted by our interest in ourselves*—it is, as it were, an extension of it, and indeed so much so that the former *serves* the latter (so far as this is compatible with the requirements and demands that are specific to knowledge as such, and without which there is no knowledge at all, and our interest in knowledge cannot be satisfied in the first place—so that the fact that our interest in ourselves creates an interest in knowledge means precisely that it binds itself to these very same requirements).

But what role does this particular kind of interest, the protagonist of the BM, play in the further development of Book I?

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17. SW II, 171 (GA I/6, 192).

First, we must keep in mind that the main results of the investigation undertaken in Book I seem to provide full satisfaction of the cognitive program that is entailed in our need for knowledge, not only insofar as they result from an investigation (and therefore seem to overcome the serious cognitive flaw that compromises all *secondhand* knowledge sc. all *unchecked* and *uncontrolled* assumptions), but also because they seem to fulfill *further* formal cognitive requirements—and indeed in such a way that the investigation undertaken in the first part of Book I *reveals these further requirements*, and makes us aware that they too are part and parcel of the *formal* program of knowledge. We cannot address this issue in detail here, so let it suffice to say the following. The investigation undertaken in the first part of Book I does not deal only with knowledge of “what I am and shall be,” that is, with knowledge of my “vocation”; it also deals with knowledge of the world around me. What is more, the first part of Book I not only *changes* our view of our “vocation,” it also *changes* our view of *the world around us*. And the reason for this is that in the first part of Book I there is (1) a fundamental change from partial knowledge (knowledge that covers only certain objects, within relatively narrow bounds, and *leaves out* other objects) to comprehensive global knowledge, or knowledge of the whole, and (2) also a fundamental change from several loosely connected pieces of knowledge to a rigorously *interconnected* whole, where there is a *continuous, determined connection* between all contents (i.e., between *each* and every one of them and *all* the others). In other words, the first part of Book I shows that when knowledge remains confined to a certain range, it is absolutely unable to determine whether there is something beyond its bounds (and a fortiori unable to determine its content), so that it cannot preclude that out of a widened horizon new perspectives could emerge and put what was previously observed *in a different light*—so much so that it turns out that it is *otherwise*. And the first part of Book I also shows that, *mutatis mutandis*, the same applies to the connection between different objects, that is, between different pieces of knowledge: if an object or field of objects is isolated from its context and from the connections it has with other objects or fields of objects, the discovery of the context (sc., of all the connections) in which it is embedded can lead to new perspectives and put what was previously observed *in a different light*—so much so that it turns out that it is *otherwise*. In short, the first part of Book I evinces that, in order to be real, knowledge requires nothing less than a certain *control of the whole* and nothing less than a *gapless connection* between all its parts. But this means that the formal cognitive agenda (the *formal* requirements of knowledge as such) has more to it than meets the eye—and that not only our usual

knowledge claims about our "vocation," but also our usual knowledge claims about the world around us are far from meeting these requirements. That is, the first part of Book I discovers a further shortcoming in our knowledge of our "vocation" and a totally unsuspected vulnerability in our knowledge of *the world around us*, so that it turns out that not only the former but also the latter suffers from a certain amount of carelessness, of *Sichverlassen* (i.e., of *relying* on *unchecked* and *uncontrolled* assumptions).

Now, the results of the investigation undertaken in the first part of Book I seem to provide full fulfillment to these further cognitive requirements. Fichte stresses this point: "What high *satisfaction* this system affords to my understanding! What order, what firm connection, what supervision does it introduce into the whole fabric of my knowledge. . . . My inquiry is closed, and my desire of knowledge satisfied."<sup>18</sup> Thus, in the first part of Book I the *protagonist* and *driving force* is our derived, self-related, constitutive *need for knowledge* and in particular the need for the *formal perfection* without which there is no knowledge at all. This protagonist seems to achieve full satisfaction of its needs. But then, all of a sudden, something else breaks through and spoils what appears to be the great moment of knowledge, the apparent *ne plus ultra of cognitive satisfaction*. Another essential component of "interest"—namely, our wishes, inclinations, and demands—raises difficulties and casts its shadow over all the rest of Book I.<sup>19</sup> For, as Fichte writes, the conclusions reached by the investigation undertaken in the first part contradict the I's "deepest innermost intimations, wishes and demands."<sup>20</sup> They "conflict . . . decisively with the innermost root of my existence, with the purpose for the sake of which I care to live and without which I deplore my existence."<sup>21</sup> In other words, the results in question conflict with our *interest in ourselves* and in particular with that part of this interest that has to do with the fact that, as we have seen, we lean toward some forms of being and have some kind of "project" for ourselves, so that we are not neutral spectators who need some answers to their questions but do not have a preference for any answer other than the correct one. In short, Book I stages what we may describe as a *conflict*

18. SW II, 184–85 (GA I/6, 203), SW II, 189 (GA I/6, 207).

19. For this sudden irruption of "recalcitrant wishes" (*widerstrebende Gefühle*), sc., of the "anguish, revulsion and horror" of the conclusions reached by the investigation undertaken in the first part of Book I, see SW II, 190ff. (GA I/6, 207ff.).

20. SW II, 190 (GA I/6, 207).

21. SW II, 190 (GA I/6, 208).

*of interest*: if the results of the investigation undertaken in its first part are the epitome of knowledge, then our *interest in ourselves* (namely, insofar as it entails an irreducible interest in knowledge) contradicts our *interest in ourselves* (namely, insofar as we take interest in the “deepest innermost intimations, wishes and demands” of our being). This is what Fichte calls the conflict between our *heart* (*Herz*) and our *understanding* (*Verstand*): what satisfies the *understanding* does not satisfy the *heart* and *vice versa*.<sup>22</sup> “Interest” has, as it were, a *contradictory nature*, and the protagonist of the BM turns out to be *divided against itself*.<sup>23</sup>

Here again it is impossible to go into all this in detail. The main point is that the results of the investigation undertaken in the first part of Book I show that everything, including consciousness (and the I itself, “that which I am conscious of as myself”), is only a thoroughly determined link in the chain of nature, that is, in the chain of absolutely necessary reality.<sup>24</sup> To be sure, this is a very gross description of the view exposed by Fichte, but it is enough to make us understand why this view seems to go against our “deepest innermost intimations, wishes and demands,” and therefore does not satisfy the “heart.” For, according to this view, the whole realm of consciousness receives its *complete determination from outside*—from external forces invisible to it.<sup>25</sup> The determination of my being lies *entirely outside myself*; everything in me (my consciousness, myself, my will, etc.) is a mere expression of something outside myself—an *epiphenomenon*: the mere *appearance* of natural, *alien* forces (i.e., of something very different from consciousness and very different from me).<sup>26</sup>

Now, Fichte points out that this goes against a deep innermost inclination of consciousness and the I, namely, the fact that the very constitution of the I entails a certain “*parti pris*” *for its reality*: the fundamental “*parti pris*” of the I for itself. The I inherently wants “to be itself the deter-

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22. This is not the place to elaborate on the opposition between *Herz* and *Verstand*, the roots of which can be traced back to Fichte’s earlier writings, to Jacobi, etc. See, for example, *Einige Aphorismen über Religion und Deismus* (1790), GA II/1, 287–91. At the end of Book I (SW, 198, GA I/6, 214), Fichte describes this same conflict as a conflict between *Erkenntnis* and *Liebe* (knowledge and love).

23. SW II, 190 (GA I/6, 210) summarizes this conflict, sc., this contradictory nature of “interest” as follows: “Why must my heart grieve and be torn apart by something that so completely sets my mind at rest?”

24. SW II, 193 (GA I/6, 210).

25. SW II, 191 (GA I/6, 208), SW II, 194–95 (GA I/6, 211).

26. SW II, 191 (GA I/6, 208). See also SW II, 196 (GA I/6, 212).

mination of itself": "I want to be myself the determination of myself," I do not want to be "in and through another—but to be something for myself": "*Ich selbst, dasjenige, dessen ich mir als meiner selbst . . . bewußt bin . . . ich selbst will selbständig,—nicht an einem anderen, und durch ein anderes, sondern für mich selbst Etwas seyn; und will, als solches, selbst der letzte Grund meiner Bestimmungen seyn.*"<sup>27</sup> In other words, the view according to which the I is a mere appearance means nothing less than a complete and utter negation of what the I as such, of its very nature, claims to be. If taken seriously, this view goes against more than some deeply ingrained inclination of the I. In point of fact, it goes against the very core of "that which I am conscious of as myself"—it undermines the I and conflicts with *its interest in itself*, in its own *reality*—for being the sole and true center of itself is what the I as such is all about.

Furthermore, as Fichte also points out, the view according to which consciousness and the I are a mere expression or epiphenomenon of something totally outside their realm and are thoroughly determined by it (i.e., *from without*) goes against another fundamental trait of consciousness and the I, namely, the fact that the I inherently understands itself as the origin and principle of its actions—and indeed in such a way that the loss of this fundamental role (the loss of its *freedom*) amounts to nothing less than the *complete and utter negation of the I* (sc., of the reality of the I itself).<sup>28</sup> In other words, the I is interested in *its freedom*—*interest in freedom* is a constitutive "*parti pris*" of "that which I am conscious of as myself." For if, as we have said, the very constitution of the I entails a fundamental "*parti pris*" *for its reality*, the fundamental "*parti pris*" of the I for itself entails, in turn, an equally constitutive "*parti pris*" *for its freedom*—i.e., the latter is part and parcel of the former. Or, as Fichte writes: "*Ich will nach einem*

27. SW II, 191(GA I/6, 209).

28. N.B., Freedom does not mean here that the I is allowed to do what he wants. It means that it is the *true principle and origin of its actions, its thoughts*, etc. The question is not whether I can do what I want, *but whether it is I who want what I seem to want* (i.e., whether I am *thoroughly acted upon* when I seem to act). We can also say that the question is whether my actions are really originated by me, sc., whether those that seem to be originated by me are not originated by me, but by something else, of which I am myself just a thoroughly passive mirror (SW II, 196 [GA I/6, 212])—a mere puppet, as in Horace's *duceris vt nervis alienis mobile lignum* (*Saturae*, ii. 7, 82—or, as it reads in Florio's translation and paraphrase of Montaigne's quote of these verses, Book II, ch. I: "So are we drawne, as wood is shoved,/ By others sinnewes each way moved.' We goe not, but we are carried." Fichte's point is that there is an irreconcilable conflict between *being an I* and *being a mere mirror of alien events*, sc., Horace's *mobile lignum*.



*frei entworfenen Zweckbegriffe mit Freiheit wollen*,” “*Ich selbst will mich machen zu dem, was ich seyn werde*” (“I want to will with freedom according to a freely conceived purpose,” “I myself want to make myself be whatever I will be”)<sup>29</sup>—namely, not just because I like it better that way, but because it is required by the very constitution of *what makes myself me*.

We can also express the conflict prompted by the results of the investigation undertaken in the first part of Book I by saying, as Fichte does, that according to the results of this investigation, “interest” itself—i.e., the whole realm we have been talking about—is a *mere epiphenomenon*, and in fact a figment (or, as Fichte says, “a rude deception”: “nothing in itself”).<sup>30</sup> In other words, (1) the derived, self-related, constitutive need for knowledge (both for knowledge of the world around us and for knowledge of our “vocation”), (2) the need for the fulfillment of the *formal requirements* of knowledge, which is entailed in (1) and derives from it, (3) all our inclinations, drives, desires, and wants, and (4) the underlying, fundamental principle (namely interest in *ourselves*, *self-interest*) that seems to be the driving force of it all—all this turns out to be only the thoroughly determined effect of something *else*, the mere *expression* or *appearance* of *alien* forces—i.e., not really my interest, not really *the interest it seems to be*, but the mere expression or appearance of an *alien* interest: the interest of the original force of nature.<sup>31</sup> Now, it is easy to see the meaning of this. It means the following: if, on the one hand, as we have seen, the BM is solely and entirely motivated by “interest,” and if, on the other hand, all our “interest” turns out to be only a figment (“nothing in itself”), then that for the sake of which the whole investigation was launched in the first place (that which is at stake in it, what it is all about) *loses its force, its substance*, and is *deprived of meaning*. In other words, the investigation undertaken in the first part of Book I leads to results that undermine its own purpose and call into question the point of the whole enterprise. As they say in certain regions of Europe, this investigation “*sägt den Zweig ab, auf dem sie sitzt*”: it *saws the branch on which it sits*. Thus, this endeavor of interest, the BM, faces the risk of losing its protagonist—a risk of “implosion,” as it were, caused by its own results, that is, by the fact that these results amount to a *complete and utter denial of nothing less than its own driving force and purpose* (i.e., to a complete and utter denial of something without

29. SW II, 192 (GA I/6, 209), SW II, 193 (GA I/6, 210).

30. SW II, 195 (GA I/6, 211), SW II, 196 (GA I/6, 212).

31. SW II, 197–98 (GA I/6, 213–14).

which it simply becomes *pointless*). But here again Fichte points out that the I, of its very nature, is bound to resist this view. For, as we have seen, "interest" is first and foremost interest *in myself*. Interest revolves around the I, it is prompted by the I or by its presence, and the very constitution of the I entails a certain "*parti pris*" for its interest, a *decidedly nonindifferent relation to it*—or, as Fichte puts it, an "interest in interest" (*das Interesse für dieses Interesse*): *the interest interest takes in itself* and which makes it, if not ineradicable, at least extremely difficult to eradicate.<sup>32</sup> To be sure, this may all be nothing but *mere appearance*. But even if it is mere appearance, *we are this appearance* (or, to put it more precisely, *I am this appearance*—appearance is the stuff "that which I am conscious of as myself" is made of). In other words, even if it is mere appearance, appearance *takes interest in itself*. In the case of the I, there is a "*parti pris*" of appearance *for itself* and this "*parti pris*" is so ingrained that it resists all attempts to reduce it.

To be sure, the fact that Fichte speaks of the heart (*Herz*) may be somewhat misleading, both because it tends to suggest a specific kind of inclination and because it does not draw our attention to how *deeply ingrained and connected with the I* and how *resistant* what he is talking about is. But, as it turns out, *Herz* stands for all these fundamental aspects that are rooted in the very core of our interest in ourselves. What Fichte is talking about does not have only to do with the fact that we lean toward certain forms of being, that we have our "I would rather"s and "I would rather not"s. It has to do with something that is essential to the very constitution of the I—namely, it has to do with the fact that the I entails a certain understanding of itself and a certain "project" of itself, so that there is a core of "I would rather"s and "I would rather not"s *that are part and parcel of the I*, so that they cannot be discarded without at the same time discarding the I itself (or as Fichte says: "without destroying myself").<sup>33</sup>

Now, this is precisely the point: "interest"—the protagonist of the BM—resists the assault, it will not be broken; it remains inextinguishable, it remains unscathed. And this is the only reason why the BM does not end with the results of the investigation undertaken in the first part of Book I. The protagonist resists the "threat of extinction" that comes from these results. And so, just as it was "interest" that launched the whole thing in the beginning, so it is interest, too—namely, the fact that "interest" resists the assault and remains unscathed—that is responsible for the continuation of the BM beyond the first part of Book I.

32. SW II, 196f. (GA I/6, 212f.).

33. SW II, 198 (GA I/6, 214).

And this is what the *second* part of Book I is all about. On the one hand, as we have seen, it depicts the tenacious resistance of “interest.” On the other hand, this resistance casts some doubt about the validity of the results of the investigation undertaken in part I: “But perhaps I made a mistake in the investigation, perhaps I grasped the sources from which it had to be conducted only partially and have not seen their every side.”<sup>34</sup> In other words, the tenacious resistance of interest raises the question whether the results of that investigation are not undermined by some cognitive flaw, that is, whether they really provide complete fulfilment of all formal requirements without which our convictions cannot qualify as knowledge. Thus, what I have called the formal cognitive program once again plays a crucial role. Perhaps there is some *carelessness* involved in the acquisition and acceptance of the results we have been talking about—perhaps they are not knowledge after all. If so, it is of course a different kind of carelessness, a different kind of *Sichverlassen*, a different kind of *relying* on *unchecked* and *uncontrolled* assumptions. Because this time carelessness has nothing to do with the lack of investigation: this time investigation itself suffers from a certain amount of carelessness, of *Sichverlassen* (i.e., of *relying* on *unchecked* and *uncontrolled* assumptions).

And this dictates the outcome of Book I: the tenacious resistance of interest makes us double check the results of the investigation undertaken in the first part. And it turns out that the conflict between *Herz* and *Verstand* is, after all, no conflict between *Herz* and *Verstand*, because what seemed to be certain, what seemed to be real knowledge, what seemed to be *Verstand*, has, after all, its own feet of clay. “Neither of the two sides is sufficiently justified,” “there is no sufficient reason for deciding one way or the other.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, the outcome of Book I is what the Ancients called *amphibolia*—it is *Unentschiedenheit*, and it turns out that it is *impossible to settle the issue*.<sup>36</sup> But here again “interest” plays a decisive role and shows unequivocally who is the protagonist of the BM. For Fichte emphasizes that this “condition of uncertainty and indecision” is simply *unbearable*: “I cannot remain undecided.”<sup>37</sup> But it is plain that, if it were not for interest, *I could*.

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34. SW II, 191 (GA I/6, 208).

35. SW II, 195 (GA I/6, 211–12), SW II, 198 (GA I/6, 214).

36. SW II, 198 (GA I/6, 214).

37. *Ibid.*

## The Dialectic of Judgment and *The Vocation of Man*

WAYNE MARTIN

I propose to approach Fichte's *Bestimmung des Menschen* by thinking about its bearing on the phenomenon of judgment. The theme of judgment is one that recurs in many of Fichte's writings, often in quite prominent contexts, and of course it was a central concern of the Kantian and post-Kantian philosophical projects. But Fichte's engagement with the theme of judgment is special, and especially rich, in large part because he is intensely attuned to the ways in which the exercise of judgment is *essentially fraught*, beset by conflict—not only in particularly vexing or difficult judgments, but by its very nature. The tension at work in the act of judgment is not simply a psychological fact; it has its roots in the transcendental structure of judgment itself. In the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte offers a theoretical articulation of a dialectical opposition at work in the exercise of judgment; in the 1800 *Vocation of Man* he enacts or reenacts those tensions—and the instabilities that ensue—in an extended exploration of a single task of judgment. There can be little doubt that this reenactment is at least partly autobiographical—tracing as it does the trajectory of Fichte's own philosophical development. But it is also artful and, in places, artificial and contrived. The question is what this artful reenactment might teach us about judgment, and how it informs Fichte's understanding of the distinctive *Bestimmung* of man.

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Let me begin with some preliminaries that pertain to the literary form of Fichte's text. Readers of the *Vocation of Man* must be struck from the outset by its similarities to Descartes's *Meditations*. Like the *Meditations*, Fichte's book opens with a contrast between what we ordinarily think we know and what we can legitimately claim to know; both authors begin with a resolution to knowledge that would be thoroughly *autonomous*—not simply passed down from authority but thought through and established conclusively *for oneself*. In both cases this resolution to autonomous knowledge quickly collapses into a state of doubt. Over the course of the subsequent investigations both authors manage to recover the world, albeit under a transformed understanding of what that world is. And in both cases this trajectory of loss and recovery goes by way of a philosophical vindication of theological commitments regarding the existence of God and the possibility of a future life.

I return below to consider a further important similarity of form between the *Meditations* and Fichte's *Vocation*: their respective uses of the first person pronoun. But before doing so I want to mark one very fundamental *difference* between these two meditative inquiries. This pertains to the issue of what it is that the two authors set out to know. Start from the first sentence of Book One of Fichte's text. Under the heading, *Doubt*, Fichte begins as follows:

On the whole, I think that by now I know a good deal of the world around me; and indeed I have made enough of an effort and sufficient care in acquiring this knowledge. (VM, 3)

This is a sentence that could easily find its place in Descartes's text—an expression of our everyday and scientific epistemic confidence, shortly to be followed by a jarring encounter with skeptical doubt, which will effectively undermine that confidence. As Fichte's opening paragraph unfolds, this sense of *déjà vu* is reinforced, as the voice of the text boasts of the care with which he “gives credence only to the confirmation of my senses, only to a consistent experience” (VM, 3). If this were a Cartesian meditation then we would know exactly what to expect next: this confident but naive reliance on our sensory acquaintance with the world must be thrown into doubt, with a cascading collapse of the purported knowledge—whether everyday or scientific—that was so carefully constructed upon it.

But we are not in a Cartesian meditation here. After this characteristically Cartesian opening, Fichte's plot immediately takes quite a different turn. As it turns out, the doubt that gives its name to Book One is not a

doubt about the external world at all. Indeed, Fichte's version of the First Meditation never bothers to cast doubt on our claim to have knowledge of *objects*. What is cast in doubt—here the reversal of Descartes is striking—is our knowledge of *ourselves*. Hence, Fichte's guiding question: "What am I myself, and what is my vocation?" (VM, 3).

To begin to see what is at stake in this rather puzzling question, it will help to extend the comparison to Descartes one step farther. For it is true (*of course!*) that Descartes is also concerned with self-knowledge. At the despairing culmination of the First Meditation, the Cartesian meditator is brought to doubt even his own existence, and of course the Second Meditation begins the progress towards anti-skeptical recovery by staking its famous claim to indubitable knowledge of self. But here a double contrast helps to bring Fichte's distinctive project into focus. For Descartes, knowledge of self is simply the first step in the broader project of gaining knowledge of the world. It is neither the end nor the aim of his inquiry but a first step on the road toward science. By contrast, Fichte's reflexive question is not simply one question among others, much less a step toward the knowledge that really counts. For Fichte, the question about myself is the overarching question for investigation—perhaps in the end the only question that matters. This is a first critical point of contrast. But remember also that the Cartesian claim to self-knowledge is, in the first instance, a matter of knowledge of my *existence*; for Fichte, the crucial question concerns my *essence*: "What am I?" When Descartes does take up this question, his famous answer ("I am a thing that thinks") can well serve as an emblem for the family of positions to which Fichte is opposed.

Here, it is worth adverting to a second literary precedent—not Descartes's *Meditations* but Rousseau's *Confessions*. I have in mind not only the famous book that bears that title, but the whole cycle of Rousseau's confessional writings, including the lesser-known dialogue *Rousseau, Judge of Jean-Jacques*, and in particular his final work, the *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*. These confessional writings have an autobiographical form, but Rousseau's aim was never simply to write a memoir, recounting what he did and why he did it. In each case the promise—and the task—of these texts is broader. In the letter that Rousseau appended to the manuscript of *The Confessions*, he famously holds out the promise that his controversial text would advance the fledgling science of man.<sup>1</sup> The "First Walk" of the

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1. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Confessions and Correspondence, Including the Letters to Malesherbes*, trans. Christopher Kelly (Dartmouth: Dartmouth College Press, 1995), 3.

*Reveries* opens with some bitter reflections on the fate of being exiled, abandoned, and betrayed by one's friends and allies—a circumstance that rather precisely mirrors Fichte's own situation after his exile from Jena. But the question Rousseau resolves to address concerns not those others but himself:

But I, detached as I am from them and from the whole world,  
*what am I?* This must now be the object of my inquiry.<sup>2</sup>

In short, Rousseau aims both to understand himself and to illuminate the human condition as such. The two projects are intricately intertwined, and map on to the two formulations of Fichte's framing question: "What am I?" "What is the *Bestimmung* of man?" In one way, his question is intensely and inescapably first-personal. But the answer to the first-personal question implicates a broader question concerning human nature. It is also worth noting that one of Rousseau's titles explicitly identified this project as involving a task of judgment. As we shall see, this is also the case for Fichte's project in *Vocation*.

But here we also encounter a first serious obstacle in Fichte's path—an obstacle that is inextricably linked to the title of his book and the framing of his question. For Fichte, the question about man is to be answered in such a way as to identify and articulate the human *Bestimmung*. The polysemy of this notion has often been noted, and is reflected in the difficulty of translation. "*Bestimmung*" derives from *bestimmen*, which, as we shall see, is a key term in Fichte's technical idiolect—his second favorite verb after *setzen*. As a verb, *bestimmen* means to determine or specify, to fix the limits of something. If we think of the term in this sense, then the task of identifying the *Bestimmung des Menschen* is in effect the task of specifying what man is, what makes him distinctive, what distinguishes him from all the nonhuman beings. But the standard translations of Fichte's title indicate the second dimension of meaning: in French: *Destination*, in English: *Vocation*. The French translation is perhaps unfortunate, insofar as "*Destination*" suggests some kind of stopping point—the end of the line for the human project. A crucial thesis in Fichte's position will be that there is and can be no such end, that human endeavor carries on and on, even (in Fichte's most extravagant metaphysical reverie) through an infinity of future lives. "Vocation" is in this respect a better translation, suggesting as it does a

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2. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Reveries of a Solitary Walker*, trans. Peter France (London: Penguin, 1979), 27.

calling to action while leaving open the question as to whether this calling can ever be fulfilled.<sup>3</sup> But the crucial point here is that for Fichte, the task of figuring out what man is—what *I am*—is tied up with (indeed *identified with*) the question of what man *will* be, *should* be, must *become*—what his *telos* amounts to, and hence how he can orient himself in action.

In this way, Fichte's notion of *Bestimmung* systematically straddles the divide between theory and practice, and between descriptive and normative science. In this lies both the interest and the vulnerability of his project. For of course the assumption behind Fichte's question is that *there* is some human *Bestimmung*, in his deeply loaded sense of the word—some account of the distinctive nature of man that will at the same time suffice to tell us what it is in our essential nature to *become*. Those who would defend Fichte's position cannot simply defend his *answer*; it is in the first instance his *question* that must be defended—not only against those who would simply scoff at the very thought of a human destiny, but also against those who question the ontology that this framing of the project seems to presuppose. To raise Fichte's question one level higher: What would man have to be such that it makes sense to ask after his *Bestimmung* at all?

In considering the literary form of Fichte's text we must also attend to a grammatical feature that unites the works of all three authors whom I have been discussing: their use of the first person pronoun. Fichte is, of course, notorious for his idiosyncratic uses of *Ich*. The *Wissenschaftslehre* gets underway just at the point where the first person pronoun becomes nominalized. In the *Grundlage*, for instance, the crucial transition comes at the point in §1 when "*Ich bin*" is transposed into "*Das Ich setzt*." "*Ich bin schlechthin, was ich bin*" becomes "*Das Ich setzt ursprünglich schlechthin sein eigenes Seyn*."<sup>4</sup> In the first of these two formulas, the first person pronoun behaves (as it were) first personally, taking a first personal verb as its grammatical partner. But a few lines later, *Ich* has become a third person grammatical unit. There has been considerable controversy about how to interpret this distinctive usage; my own preferred interpretation is that *Ich* is not properly a pronoun in the second formula at all; it is the proper name for an abstract structure of self-reference or, as Fichte prefers, of self-reverting activity.

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3. Etymologically, "vocation" also has the advantage of hearkening back to the Latin root for "voice"—*vocare*: to call. The German root for voice also figures at the etymological basis of "*Bestimmung*." I return to this point below.

4. I am quoting here from *SW*, I, 98, but the grammatical transformation recurs in all of Fichte's attempts to present the *Wissenschaftslehre*.



However this interpretative question is settled, it is clear that this distinctive use of *Ich* does not carry over from the *Wissenschaftslehre* into *The Vocation of Man*. Indeed, this is perhaps the most definite indication of the status of the text as part of Fichte's "popular" corpus. Of course, the word "I" still appears on virtually every page of Fichte's text, but it has been grammatically normalized once again—a first person pronoun taking first person verbs. But this does not mean that Fichte's use of the word is now the usual one. In particular, *Ich* does not refer to the author of the text—that is, to Fichte himself, at least not in any straightforward way. Its function is rather more like the occurrence of "I" in a novel written from the first person point of view. For this is a philosophical text that has a character, and indeed dialogue and plot; "I" is a word uttered by this character, in whose mouth it functions in the usual way as a device of self-reference.

But this is not the whole story either, and in his Preface Fichte makes it clear that we are *not* to read the text *historisch*—that is, as we might read a novel or memoir. The word "I" is here to function as an insistent invitation *to us*, as readers; Fichte's demand is that *we* occupy the position of the protagonist in his story. Fichte's framing of this invitation will prove critical for an understanding of his text; I quote the relevant passage in full:

I still need to remind a few readers that the "I" who speaks in the book is by no means the author. Rather, the author wishes that the reader may come to see himself in this "I"; that the reader may not simply relate to what is said here as he would to history [*nicht bloß historisch fassen*], but rather that while reading he will actually converse with himself, deliberate back and forth, deduce conclusions, make decisions like his representative [*Representant*] in the book, and through his own work and reflection, purely out of his own resources, develop and build within himself the philosophical disposition [*Denkart*] that is presented to him in this book merely as a picture [*Bild*]. (VM, 2)

It seems to me that Fichte's first claim here is not entirely ingenuous. Given what we know of Fichte's own intellectual biography, it seems safe to say that the "I" of his text is at least in part autobiographical. But what matters for our purposes are the two further functions to which Fichte here draws our attention. The "I" of the text speaks as our *Representant*—the avatar, if you will, with whom we readers are invited to identify. But at the same time this "I" is meant as a portrait of sorts—an unfolding picture [*Bild*] of an individual seeking his vocation.

This dual function of the authorial “I”—at once *Bild* and *Representant*—itself serves to project the standard by which the success of Fichte’s text is to be measured. This is *not* a straightforward philosophical treatise, whose success is measured strictly by the soundness of its arguments. There are indeed arguments here, but the success of the text depends ultimately upon the extent to which the two functions of the authorial “I” coincide. The “I” in Fichte’s text can serve as my representative if and only if I can recognize myself in and identify with the portrait that progressively unfolds. Ultimately, the text succeeds or fails according to whether it moves its reader to the mode of thinking—the disposition, the *Denkart*—where its authorial voice finally comes to rest.

So what exactly do we find our representative doing in this portrait in which we are called to participate? We can take our lead from the formula Fichte provides in the Preface. He (that is, we, I, . . . ) is at work “deliberating back and forth,” “deducing conclusions, making decisions.” In short, he is engaged in an act of reasoned judgment, self-judgment—judgment concerning his nature and his vocation. And this act of judgment is to be undertaken “through his own work and reflection, purely out of his own resources.” We are not to rely on resources outside ourselves, not even, in principle, on the account provided by Fichte himself. To identify with our representative in the text we must share his founding resolution:

At this moment I will claim my rights and assume my proper dignity. Let everything alien be given up. I will investigate *for myself*. (VM, 4)

I am going to call this *the resolution of autonomous judgment*—the resolution of the authorial “I” to take nothing on dogmatic authority, but to conduct his own investigation and to reach his own decision by and for and about himself. What I want to propose is that Fichte’s text seeks to *enact* such an autonomous judgment, and to *prompt* an autonomous judgment in his readers, all while also undertaking a *study* of what autonomous judgment amounts to, and illustrating his own account of the *obstacles* that must be overcome if the goal of autonomous judgment is to be attained.

In making this out, I propose to take my orientation from the account of the transcendental structure of judgment that we find in the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*. In the opening section of the *Grundlage*, Fichte describes judgment as “an activity of the human mind” (SW, I, 95: “*Alles Urteilen ist . . . ein Handeln des menschlichen Geistes*”). Fichte there advances this claim as a fact of “empirical consciousness,” but what interests me is his account of the underlying transcendental structure at work in the exer-

cise of this activity. Allow me here to rely on one partial account of this structure, which we find sketched at the beginning of the fourth section of the *Grundlage*. Recall that Fichte is there concerned in the first instance with theoretical or cognitive judgment, whose structure he articulates in the guiding principle of that stretch of his text: "The I posits itself as determined by the not-I" (see, *inter alia*, SW, I, 127). The verb translated as "determine" is of, course, *bestimmen*.

What matters for my purposes here is that Fichte finds in this master principle an underlying dialectical tension, a tension that he proceeds to unfold into the pair of principles that govern the dialectical development of the balance of his discussion. Fichte's formulations of these two principles vary; for my purposes here I shall operate with the following versions, which we can think of as his thesis and antithesis, respectively. Thesis: "The I determines itself (by absolute activity)." Antithesis: "The not-I (actively) determines the I (which is to that extent passive)" (SW, I, 127). I propose to think of these two principles as together comprising the elements of a distinctive dialectical tension at work in the notion, and in the act, of judgment.

In thinking about the force of this dialectical tension, we can take our bearings from the resolution of autonomous judgment undertaken by our representative in *The Vocation of Man*. In his resolution to autonomy we can see the thesis of the dialectic at work. To judge autonomously requires that I make up my mind *for myself*; that *I* be the author of my decision. This requires a form of "absolute activity" if I am to be the genuine *source* of the judgment, rather than simply a conduit through which it is transmitted. Here, I find it useful to think in terms of the structure of a chain of command. A junior officer or middle manager may find himself tasked with transmitting and implementing some policy adopted by his superiors. But the decision is not *his* decision, precisely because he is not the locus of the activity that produced it. He is just a link in the chain whereby the activity of the *actual* judges is applied, as it were, on the ground. Nonetheless, part of what constitutes an "activity of mind" *as a judgment* is that it be constrained by the facts; it must be responsive to the evidence relevant to the question at issue. Here, we have the principle of our antithesis: the *judgmental* activity of the I must be determined by something beyond its control.

It is worth noting that this dialectic of judgment is not simply a theoretical or speculative problem. Think for a moment of a setting in a modern psychiatric clinic. A severely ill patient is refusing a medical treatment that, in the opinion of the medical team, is essential to his health.

Perhaps the patient is severely anorexic, with low body mass threatening permanent organ damage. Perhaps he suffers from borderline personality disorder, engages in self-harm, and requires a life-saving blood transfusion. But despite the diagnosis, and the pressing urgency of medical care, the patient refuses to consent to treatment.

In determining what happens next in such scenarios, the critical question turns on an assessment of *mental competence* or *mental capacity*—in short, whether the patient has the ability to make decisions for himself. In liberal legal jurisdictions, patients typically have a right to refuse medical treatment. But where a patient is unable to make a decision for himself—to judge autonomously—this right is replaced by duties-of-care on the part of medical institutions and their staff, who must act paternalistically in the patient's best interest. In undertaking a capacity assessment, the dialectic of judgment becomes a dilemma of medical care. Should the clinician emphasize the thesis, which treats judgment as an act of self-assertion? Or should she privilege the antithesis, which recognizes *judgment* only where the result is determined by the evidence? The clinical situation typically requires that we allow one or the other of these two principles to predominate in any particular case. But the speculative task is to find a way of accommodating both principles, thereby stabilizing the dialectical tension.

So how does the dialectic of judgment play out in *The Vocation of Man*, and how, if at all, does Fichte propose to stabilize it? I cannot provide a complete answer to these questions, but shall undertake to trace three manifestations of the dialectic in Fichte's undertaking. Before proceeding farther, however, I must acknowledge that the language I am using here is not per se the language of Fichte's text. Where I am speaking mainly of judgment, the passages from Fichte's text that I have in mind are organized around the language of *decision*. But let me for now not worry too much about the terminology; what concerns me here is the transcendental structure of the phenomenon. What we find is that Fichte explores both extremes of the dialectic before finally exemplifying a purported resolution.

The first occasion on which Fichte's text provides us with an account of the exercise of judgment comes near the end of the first, broadly Spinozistic chapter of the work. Having elaborated a deterministic vision of nature and man's place within it, Fichte's character—our representative—finally comes to the question of what it is, given such a worldview, to reach a decision. On this first portrait of judgment, a decision comes about strictly through the operation of what Fichte calls inner natural forces [*innere Naturkräfte*]. Here is the crucial stretch of text applying this model to deliberation and decision:

The immediate consciousness of a striving of [natural] forces . . . is the consciousness of inclination or desire; the battle of opposed forces is indecision; the victory of one of these is experienced as making up your mind with a decision. (VM, 17)

I have followed Preuss's translation here, although as we shall see, it is not strictly accurate. But Preuss certainly captures the main element of Fichte's first model here: desire, deliberation, decision, judgment . . . , all these manifestations of agency and rational subjectivity are, on the model of Book One, to be understood as the play of natural forces flowing through us.

In terms of our dialectic, this amounts to a radical privileging of the antithesis. Unfortunately, this is somewhat lost in Preuss's translation, with its talk of "the experience of making up your mind with a decision." What Fichte describes is a process whereby a state of *Unentschlossenheit* [indecision] finally gives way to *Entschloss*. By translating *Entschloss* as "making up your mind with a decision," Preuss not only imports words that are absent from Fichte's original (nothing in Fichte's German corresponds to "making up one's own mind"), he imports a reference to judgment as activity that Fichte himself is careful to omit. I hasten to add that Preuss is not mistaken about the underlying philosophical position. Even in the hard determinist position articulated in Book One, it is still true that we *experience* judgment as an activity of the mind—the activity of "making up one's mind in a decision." That is just what Fichte had described in the *Grundlage* as a deliverance of empirical consciousness. The conclusion of Book I is that such an experience is illusory—it presents as real something that is not—and that activity is in no way part of the underlying structure of judgment. Preuss's translation gets all that right. What it misses is a portrait of judgment from which all traces of the language of activity has been drained.

So here we have one portrait of judgment: a naturalistic, deterministic portrait that utterly downplays the thesis of the dialectic of judgment. But already within the compass of the first book we are offered a second portrait of judgment, a portrait in which the determining activity of the I reasserts itself against the antithesis.

In this connection I observe my immediate self-consciousness . . . and find the following. I know various possible ways of acting, among which, it seems to me, I can choose whichever I want. I consider them all, think of new ones, clarify each, compare them with each other, and weigh the possibilities. Finally I choose one from among all of them, determine my will

accordingly, and from this resolution of the will [*Willensentschluss*], there follows the corresponding act. (VM, 22)

What Fichte offers us here is in effect a phenomenological report on the activity of making a decision. But it is, in its way, a profoundly one-sided account of the phenomenology of judgment and decision. To be sure, it captures one aspect of the experience of reaching a decision—the part that reflects the experience of the agency of being a judge. But what is missing here is that aspect of the phenomenology of judgment and decision that involves being guided and constrained in the exercise of judgment—the sense that not just anything is choosable, and that one's choice must ultimately answer to something that is itself beyond the exercise of one's will. The one-sidedness of the phenomenological report is brought out sharply in the conclusion of this passage, where our representative announces: "I make myself, my being through my thinking; *my thinking simply through my thinking*" (VM, 22). Here, we have the thesis of our dialectic in its full, unqualified and unbalanced glory. If the first portrait of decision and judgment showed us a self that is nothing but the site for the working out of a conflict of natural forces; this second portrait shows us a judging subject that is utterly self-authoring, autochthonous, unconstrained, and undetermined by anything beyond itself.

But it is at this point that the distinctive literary form of Fichte's text makes itself felt. We have been given two models of judgment and decision, one radically naturalistic, one voluntaristic—one emphasizes the antithesis and the other the thesis of the dialectic of judgment. But Fichte's text does not simply offer *theories* of judgment; it *enacts* a judgment, and demands of its readers that we enact a judgment as well. So, after offering us these two philosophical models of the circumstance and process of reaching a decision, Book One concludes by taking up the position of the judge—a judge who finds himself unable to decide between the options with which he is faced:

I cannot remain undecided: my whole peace of mind and dignity depend on the answer to this question. It is just as impossible for me to decide: I simply have no sufficient reason for deciding one way or another. (VM, 26)

It would be easy to glide past this sort of passage as if it were simply a melodramatic literary flourish, which in one way it certainly is. But this would be to miss something crucial about Fichte's text, particularly given his very specific instructions to the reader at the outset. The thing to notice here is

the way in which Fichte's account of the actual enactment of this particular task of judgment goes beyond the limits of the two one-sided accounts of judgment with which we have thus far been presented. The figure in the throes of judgment is indeed aware of his judgmental agency: he must decide, and it is up to him to do so. But to be capable of decision is not simply a matter of self-assertion; the obstacle to judgment here is not a lack of *power* on the part of the judge. It is an absence of sufficient *evidence* to determine the case: "*Ich habe schlechthin keinen Entscheidungs-Grund, weder für das Eine noch für das Andere*" (SW, II, 198; emphasis added).

So already in the first book we are presented with three accountings of judgment. A radically naturalistic account of judgment privileges the antithesis of the dialectic; a one-sided phenomenological report privileges the thesis. But the actual enactment of a task of judgment shows the need for some way of reconciling the two—a model of judgmental *self-determination* that is nonetheless determined by *grounds* or *reasons*.

I shall not here undertake a detailed reconstruction of the rather intricate argument undertaken in the second book of Fichte's text.<sup>5</sup> What we find there, in short, is an uncompromising elaboration of an account of self-determination that eliminates any and all reference to determination by something other. Here, in a fashion familiar from *one* direction of movement in the *Jena Wissenschaftslehre*, Fichte pushes to its utmost extreme the model of an "I" whose activity is all-encompassing and all-determining, excluding any form of genuine facticity, passivity, or receptivity in judgment. In the words of the Spirit, "[T]he consciousness of a thing outside of us is absolutely nothing more than the product of our own presentative capacity [*Vorstellungsvermögen*]" (VM, 59). Now, in some suitably qualified sense this is indeed a statement of Fichte's own position in the *Wissenschaftslehre*—or at least of one part of his position. But in the account of Book Two this position is pushed to its bitterest, and ultimately self-undermining conclusion.

We reach one crescendo of this line of thought in one of the most famous lines of Fichte's text:

[A]t each moment of my consciousness I say "I, I, I and always I"—that is "I" and not the particular thing outside of me which I think at this moment. (VM, 63)

This is a line that has sometimes been used to summarize Fichte's overall philosophical stance—or else simply to caricature it.<sup>6</sup> What has not been

5. For an illuminating discussion, see Arnold Farr's contribution to this volume.

6. For an example see W. Gresley's summary of "German Metaphysics," in *Priests and Philosophers* (London: Masters, 1873), 302.

understood is that Fichte uses this claim to set in motion a distinctive *reductio* strategy. The passage immediately goes on to argue that if this were true “the ‘I’ itself would disappear for me at each moment and again be renewed” (VM, 63). The outcome, a few lines later, is the conclusion that “nowhere is there anything that endures, neither outside me nor in me, but only ceaseless change” (VM, 63).

The argument offered in support of this nihilistic conclusion is sketchy and enthymatic. But Fichte’s contemporary readers would have recognized here elements of Jacobi’s allegations, themselves deriving in no small part from Hume, concerning the ultimate outcome of “speculative” philosophy. Roughly: if our knowledge is wholly based on a spectatorial relation to passing presentations then we find ourselves reduced to skepticism about the continued existence of both substances and subjects. The enduring “I,” no less than the enduring object, is a systematic illusion.<sup>7</sup>

According to the above there is, in short, nothing, absolutely nothing but presentations, determinations of a consciousness as a mere consciousness. But I consider a presentation to be a mere image, only a shadow of a reality. It cannot in itself satisfy me and is in itself not of the slightest value. I might allow the world of bodies outside of me to disappear into mere presentations and dissolve into shadows. It is of no great concern to me. But according to the above I myself disappear no less than it. (VM, 60)

In order to appreciate the function and significance of these conclusions within Fichte’s argument, we must once again adhere closely to the instructions he provides in his Preface. If we take those instructions seriously, then our task as readers must be to adopt this *Bild* of the judging subject in such a way as to recognize in it our *Representant* in the deliberative undertaking enacted in the book itself. What happens when we attempt to do so? We reach an impasse, as a result of which we find the point of collapse in the unfolding of Book Two. For as we have seen, the portrait that has been produced at this juncture involves a kind of Heraclitean nihilism, in which nothing, *including the judging subject*, retains its identity over time. But to identify with our *Representant* requires us to recognize something that *has persisted*. Why? Because in identifying with the “I” of the text we must recognize him as the deliberating subject who *has been seeking and continues to seek* an answer to his guiding question. Without the

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7. For an analysis of Jacobi’s position, see Frederick Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German Philosophy Between Kant and Hegel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987), chapter II.



persistence of a deliberator there can be no deliberation; so to recognize our *Representant* is *ipso facto* to abandon the *Bild* that the second book proposes.

Allow me to conclude with a few words about the resolution of Fichte's enquiry. We have seen that Books One and Two of *Vocation* both end at a dialectical impasse over judgment. Does the text as a whole offer us a way out? As is well known, the third book of *Vocation* opens with a characteristically Fichtean turn from theory to practice ("Your vocation is not merely to know, but to *act* according to your knowledge" [VM, 67]). The text that follows emphasizes the agency of man, and rehearses elements of Fichte's theory of drives. But it also becomes increasingly theological as the book develops, culminating with a passage that explicitly takes the form of a prayer (VM, 111ff). Where in all this might we look for a resolution of the dialectic of judgment?

In thinking about this problem, our best lead comes once again by attending to a detail regarding the distinctive form of Fichte's text. What we must appreciate in this instance is the way in which the text as a whole unfolds through the presentation of a variety of different voices. The notion of a voice (*Stimme*) figures implicitly in the title of Fichte's text (*Stimme* is the basic etymological root for *Bestimmung*), and a whole chorus of voices figures in his text as it develops. Certainly the two most prominent are the voice of our *Representant*, the authorial persona of the text, and the voice of the Spirit. But these are not the only voices that make themselves heard. The first book begins with a recollection of hearing, as the authorial figure remembers being instructed dogmatically as to the proper vocation of man (VM, 4). This is juxtaposed to the resolution to autonomous judgment, which is itself elaborated by appeal to a voice:

Did I, when I came across something plausible, withhold my assent, test and test again this probability, clarify it, and compare it—*until an inner voice unmistakably and irresistibly called to me*: "It is so and not otherwise." (VM, 3; emphasis added)

The argument of the second book is driven by the voice of the Spirit, and the turn to practice in the third book begins with yet another voice:

This is what I *clearly hear* in my inmost soul as soon as I collect myself for a moment and pay attention to myself. . . . This *voice* leads me out. (VM, 67–68; emphasis altered)

The prayer at the end of the text is delivered in the voice of the authorial persona, but invokes a kind of unison with the voice of God ("Your voice

sounds in me and mine resounds in you" [VM, 111]). In short, the text is saturated from beginning to end by the trope of vocality.

We might simply put this down as one more literary artifice in Fichte's highly contrived and artificial text. But in this case the artifice also points us toward Fichte's distinctive position. In his quest to disclose his own vocation, the "I" of Fichte's text finds himself drawn along successively by different voices. As the text unfolds, he progressively follows and then repudiates the voices that have been guiding him, first by repudiating the dogmatic authority who originally taught him his vocation, and subsequently by repudiating both the teachings and the authority of the Spirit who guided him through Book Two. ("You are a malicious spirit. Your knowledge itself is malice, and derives from malice, and I cannot be grateful that you have brought me along this road" [VM, 64]).

It is important to recognize that this is not simply a case of disagreeing with what the Spirit says, but of repudiating the authority of the Spirit itself, and the standpoint (speculative knowledge detached from practice) that it represents. A similar point applies with respect to the voice of dogmatic authority at the outset of the text. Our authorial figure may well come ultimately to agree with the content of what he was dogmatically taught as a child; what is rejected is the abdication of autonomy that would be involved in deference to the voice of another in determining one's vocation. If he is to be faithful to the resolution of autonomous judgment then he must ultimately follow a voice that is his own.

This way of framing the problem brings into view the critical question. Amid the chorus of voices propounding upon his vocation, is there one with which our *Representant* can irrevocably identify—one that he can recognize as his own? Fichte's answer to this question is inextricably tied up with his distinctive and controversial account of *conscience*. In *The System of Ethics*, Fichte had notoriously argued for the inerrancy of conscience (see, e.g., SE, 165), and it is in recognizing the voice of conscience that the text of *Vocation* finally achieves its dénouement. "Shall I refuse obedience to that inner voice? I will not" (VM, 71). This is not the place to undertake a detailed reconstruction of Fichte's theory of conscience.<sup>8</sup> What I wish to emphasize here are its consequences with regard to the dialectic of judgment. On Fichte's account, our judgments, decisions, and actions must *all* be guided by conscience. Conscience prompts us to moral action, but it also demands our cognitive assent where evidence is compelling.

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8. For an overview of Fichte's account see Bärbel Frischmann, "The Concept of Conscience in Fichte's *System of Ethics*," *Philosophy Today* 52, no. 3–4 (2008): 321–26.

What I want to suggest is that, on Fichte's account, to follow the voice of conscience is also to do justice both to the thesis and to the antithesis of the dialectical tension at work in judgment itself.

To see this point, we can take our orientation from the culminating passage in Fichte's treatment of conscience in Book Three:

There is nothing truly real, lasting, imperishable in me except these two parts: the voice of my conscience and my free obedience. (VM, 107)

Notice the two sides of Fichte's description. For our authorial representative, to hear the voice of conscience, and to be guided by it, is at once to follow one's own voice ("my conscience"), and to be constrained by it (it demands *obedience*). The voice of conscience prompts me to action: both to moral action in my world and to the distinctive theoretical activity of assenting where evidence is compelling. In recognizing that voice, and following its promptings, I follow a voice that (according to Fichte) is inalienably mine. In this movement of being determined by my own conscience, Fichte seeks to remain faithful to the thesis of our dialectic, and thereby to his resolution of autonomous judgment. But at the same time, the voice of conscience guides and constrains me. It does not simply follow my whim, but makes stringent demands upon me, on my actions, and on my assent. In this way, we do justice to the demands of the antithesis of the dialectic: free obedience to the demands of conscience is itself *obedience*, and thus constrains my self-determination.

From our twenty-first-century perspective it may be difficult to accept Fichte's account of conscience at face value. We are much more likely to think of conscience as some kind of internalized voice of an other, as the voice of some conventional morality, as the manifestation of our super-ego . . . It is thus difficult to accept that conscience is an inerrant authority from which we cannot be alienated. I cannot here undertake to assess Fichte's position against these alternatives. What I wish to emphasize is the way in which this act of deference to conscience constitutes a resolution of the governing tension within Fichte's text itself, particularly when that text is read in the way Fichte himself instructs us to read. As I have tried to show, *The Vocation of Man* is a text that seeks both a *theory* of judgment and at the same time an *enactment* of a judgment—the judgment concerning man's vocation. What we see in this enactment—or rather: what we *hear*—is a process that involves a multitude of conflicting voices, and a sorting procedure, whereby the judge finds one to be his own. To judge

is to speak with one voice. To judge *autonomously* requires that we find a voice that is genuinely our own. Accordingly, Fichte's proposed resolution of the paradox of judgment rises or falls with the adequacy of his distinctive and characteristically radical theory of conscience.



## The Traction of the World, or Fichte on Practical Reason and the *Vocation of Man*

TOM ROCKMORE

Fichte's philosophically most significant or even his most interesting writings are not always his most technical ones. His corpus contains popular, semipopular, as well as very technical writings. The *Vocation of Man* is a semipopular text, which is not intended for a professional philosophical audience in effectively transforming his ethics into a moral theory.

The focus of this chapter will be on Kantian and post-Kantian epistemology, specifically on practical reason as concerning morality or ethics. My reason for focusing on this theme is that around the time that Fichte composed this text his position changed in a way that decisively weakened it.

In Kant's moral theory, practical reason is wholly independent of contingent circumstances. Fichte, who formulates a theory of the philosophical subject in context, hence as limited by its surroundings, draws attention to a difference in kind between theoretical and practical reason by parting company with Kant, who treats morality along the lines of earlier treatment of theoretical reason. But he attenuates this distinction in the *Vocation* by mainly or even wholly suppressing contextual limitations introduced earlier through the concept of striving. The result is to retreat from ethics, which, as I will use the term, is contextual, in the direction of morality, which is not contextual.

## Fichte's Reaction to Kant

In the *First Introduction*, Fichte indicates his intent to present Kant's "great discovery"<sup>1</sup> independently of him. I take Fichte to be identifying Kant's discovery as the so-called Copernican revolution in philosophy. Kant never employs this term to designate his own position, but, during his lifetime, it was employed to describe the critical philosophy by such contemporaries as Reinhold and Schelling. Kant's Copernican revolution is indicated in the famous claim to invert the relation of subject and object so that the cognitive object depends on the subject and not conversely. Fichte indicates his view of the Kantian discovery in writing: "[T]he object shall be posited and determined by the cognitive faculty, and not the cognitive faculty by the object" (*FI*, 4).

I take the Copernican revolution to feature a constructivist turn from Kant's early representationalism, which is already clear in the Herz letter early in what is known as the critical period, and which Kant later appears to abandon for a constructivist approach to knowledge. In carrying the critical philosophy beyond Kant, Fichte's single most important contribution lies in rethinking the subject after the French Revolution.

Fichte works out this view in his early Jena writings. In discussing the subject, I will focus on a single crucial point as concerns the concept of striving. Kant, who anticipates Husserl's critique of psychologism, distinguishes between the real human subject and the philosophical subject. He proposes an analysis of theoretical and practical reason in terms of an account of the philosophical subject as distinguished from an account of finite human being.

In this respect, the concept of activity is crucial. We can say that Kant analyzes three basic types of experience in terms of types of activity in the three *Critiques*. In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant begins from a subject, which, as passive, is affected in its reception of the contents of the sensory manifold. In departing from Kant, Fichte can be said to invert this procedure by beginning with the subject as active, in order to analyze types of experience. His basic assumption is that philosophy must explain experience, which can be understood from the perspective of the subject, which is itself understood as active, or activity, and never passive. From this perspective, Fichte formulates a position in which philosophical theories are invoked to respond to practical problems. With the subject as the central

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1. SK, 3.

conception, Fichte works out what can be described as a minimal form of ontology, comparable perhaps to the three-substance Cartesian ontology (thinking substance, extended substance, and infinite substance), which in Fichte's position is composed of the not-self, finite self, and absolute self.

Fichte understands the subject, or self, as finite human being, which acts and which is limited by its surroundings. In introducing the conception of striving, Fichte brilliantly illuminates the problem of the practical in providing, as Kant does not, for a conception of practical reason that is progressively realized in surpassing the sterile dichotomy between autonomy and heteronomy. He leaves behind the basic Kantian dichotomy between necessity and freedom in depicting human activity as limited by the surroundings.

Striving, Fichte's term for what is essentially practical activity in general, is the manifestation of a desire, supposedly constitutive of human being, to attain ever-increasing autonomy through progressively overcoming limitations posed by the surrounding world. As used by Fichte, the term suggests a meaning similar to Spinoza's *conatus*. The difference is that whereas in Spinoza the emphasis is on self-preservation, in Fichte it is on self-development. But, as in the case of *conatus*, striving is deprived of causality. "The striving of the self must be infinite, and can never have causality."<sup>2</sup> Hence, striving is not in itself causal activity, but rather a longing or desire for causality. In the *Vocation*, Fichte restates the conception of striving, for instance in stating that "[t]here is in me a drive to absolute independent self-activity" (V, 68). In the critical philosophy, Kant is faced with the difficulty, which I believe is insoluble within the limits of his position, of how someone who determines himself to act on a universalizable moral principle, can in fact break into the causal chain to carry out the action. In depriving striving of causal efficacy, Fichte does not resolve but only restates this Kantian dilemma.

## Doubt

The relation of the *Vocation* to the critical philosophy is very complex. The progression from doubt through knowledge to faith reads like a commentary on Kant's famous claim. Fichte seems to conflate the many differences between epistemic and religious faith. He focuses on whether claims for

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2. Ibid., 252.



knowledge require faith or reason. The former concerns roughly whether knowledge requires faith in reason, as Hegel later claims. The latter relates to what is sometimes called a higher being. It is difficult to deny that after leaving Jena in the wake of the *Atheismusstreit*, Fichte reworked his theory of ethics, which, in this text, depends on the real existence of a supersensual realm, something that in Kant is no more than a posit.

As in the *First Introduction*, in the *Vocation* the section on Doubt opposes two views, neither of which can be demonstrated. On the one hand, there is a rigid causal determinism, and on the other a so-called system of freedom. Yet a rigid causal approach is insufficient since, in a world bound up in a rigid causal chain, there is also thought. Fichte writes: "I recognize myself generally as an independent being. For this reason I appear to myself *as free* in certain occurrences of my life, when these occurrences are the manifestation of the independent power which falls to my share as an individual, as restrained and limited" (VM[LLA], 19).

Three points suggest themselves here. First, Fichte's claim to appear to himself as free is completely unsupported, a mere observation in search of an argument. Second, the freedom in question is not absolute, but relative. Third, it is unclear at this point what kind of freedom is being claimed.

## Knowledge

The second section is taken up with a conversation between the subject and itself, or between the I and spirit, or perhaps between consciousness and self-consciousness. Fichte here expounds an intermediate epistemological approach combining elements of representationalism and constructivism drawn from Kant's critical philosophy.

In the section on Knowledge in the *Vocation*, as in the *Grundlage* (1794), Fichte apparently combines both representationalist and constructivist elements in a single approach. Now indicating what he thinks freedom amounts to, he describes knowledge through "the presence in consciousness of the freely acting intellect, which is the basis of its explanation of experience."<sup>3</sup> According to Fichte, consciousness is based on self-consciousness, and in perception we directly perceive only ourselves. I must posit an object as the foundation or cause of sensation, which I perceive and know as the spontaneous representation, caused by external things, and discovered through thought. I have immediate consciousness of my activity, which

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3. Ibid., 12 fn.

amounts to consciousness of my construction of the representation of the object, or again that the subject posits the object.

Since the subject constructs the object of experience in the form of a representation, Fichte claims, in stating the fundamental principle of what, since Hegel, is known as identity philosophy (*Identitätsphilosophie*), that the subject is a subject-object or subject and object, or again an identity of subject and object (VM[LLA], 60, 62). According to Fichte, the subject is the foundation of consciousness, through whose laws he explains the representation of an independent external world based on self-consciousness in which, as he says, I see my seeing, or am conscious of my consciousness (VM[LLA], 64). The Fichtean theory of knowledge concerns an interaction between an inferred external object and a subject. The object impacts on the subject, which in turn brings it to consciousness as a representation through definite laws (VM[LLA], 74). In knowing we know only ourselves (VM[LLA], 75), or the self, which is always present to consciousness (VM[LLA], 79). According to Fichte, all knowledge consists in pictures or representations and external reality has vanished (VM[LLA], 81–82).

This approach to theory of knowledge builds, *inter alia*, on the views of Spinoza and Kant. In identifying the parallel between thought and being, Spinoza states the central epistemological problem of German idealism. This problem, which goes back to Parmenides, later motivates Kant. The latter's Copernican claim that we can only know what we construct points to a solution that is supposedly hidden in the depth of the human soul and cannot be described.<sup>4</sup> Fichte further works out this constructivist solution from the perspective of the subject in two points: First, knowledge is confined to the contents of consciousness. This is a form of what is widely now called internalism. Second, if the subject constructs the cognitive object, then subject and object are identical, so that in knowing the object the subject knows only itself. This is, to the best of my knowledge, the first clearly articulated form of the idealist constructivist epistemological thesis, which dominates German idealism from Kant through Fichte and Schelling to Hegel and, I believe, Marx.

## Faith

Fichte devotes roughly half of the volume to Doubt and Knowledge and the other half to Faith, which, hence, looms disproportionately large. The

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4. See Kant, KrV, B 181.

account of Faith is further divided into four sections without headings. I will be selective here in commenting on certain sections only.

Fichte, who points to the limits of theory, maintains that one must surpass mere representation in action. The subject as actor must consider itself as independent, namely, as able to think freely and so to act (VM[LLA], 85) even if no knowledge can ground itself (VM[LLA], 88). This is Fichte's answer to those who read him as an epistemological foundationalist. Yet it remains to be seen what kind of freedom morality or ethics, in short practical reason, requires. Fichte simply passes over the question too quickly to identify and evaluate his view. His suggestion that faith, or the will, allows for the validity of knowledge, can be read in both epistemic and religious senses.

He works out this suggestion in the four numbered sections that make up his account of Faith. His conviction that I can hope, but nature must be in harmony with me, suggests an undemonstrated and indemonstrable relation between the individual and nature. Fichte asserts that listening to and following my conscience is my true vocation. He affirms that moral faith in the capacity to act efficaciously is the basis of our action (VM[LLA], 98). He declares his intention to found theory in practice because "the practical reason is the root of all reason" (VM[LLA], 98–99).

The second section replies to Kant's challenge in *Perpetual Peace* (1795). Reason must and will realize a rational life in abolishing evil as well as war through establishing just nations, since "our destined dwelling place must be made complete" (VM[LLA], 103). Freedom, not nature, is the greatest enemy of human beings (VM[LLA], 104), since it is our vocation to unite ourselves into a single body. Establishing "the only true state," which is based on "internal peace," obviates the "possibility of foreign war, [which,] at least with other true states, is cut off" (VM[LLA], 109). The oppression of the ruling classes inexorably leads human emancipation through just internal organization and peace among nations in the true state without any temptation to evil (VM[LLA], 111). This goal, which is the purpose of life on earth, must sometime be realized (VM[LLA], 113).

In the third subsection, Fichte claims that individuals exist for the sake of reason, which appears to mean carrying out the commands of conscience, whose end requires a supersensual world (VM[LLA], 116). This line of reasoning reminds us again of Kant's suggestion in the B Preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason* that, in respect to practical reason, it is necessary to "deny knowledge in order to make room for faith."<sup>5</sup> Yet Fichte appears to

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5. Ibid., B xxx.

transgress the Kantian limits of reason in now “deducing” the supersensual world. It is as if Fichte felt constrained, in his existential predicament, to reaffirm his rational faith in advancing a view of the human subject as poised between a visible world that is governed by action and an invisible world that is governed by will. The former exists through duty and the latter will be revealed (VM[LLA], 125). He claims even now to live in the spiritual world more than in the terrestrial one (VM[LLA], 128). Left unanswered is the crucial point of whether, as Fichte now implies, a view of practical reason without a supersensual world is meaningful.

Human responsibility is incarnated in the will, which is wholly mine (VM[LLA], 121). This life is meaningful in relation to another life, which Fichte describes as “*a life in faith*” (VM[LLA], 122). An individual’s true nature lies in belonging to two orders: the purely spiritual and the sensuous order, in which one must will according to the moral law (VM[LLA], 124–25). This is all simply stated without argument, hence dogmatically.

Fichte summarizes his analysis in two points: first, moral volition is demanded of us for its sake alone; and, second, this demand is reasonable. According to Fichte, these two points lead to faith in a supersensual world (VM[LLA], 127). Yet this inference does not follow. Fichte’s analysis is sustained by his religious faith. Yet one could argue, as, for instance, Camus and others do, that purpose is not given by anything other than ourselves and that there is no intrinsic meaning to human existence nor necessity that reason must triumph. And one could further argue that it is not necessary to have faith in a supersensual world to believe that one ought to act according to the dictates of conscience.

The fourth and last section is a kind of sermon, which, from the philosophical perspective, is exceedingly barren. Fichte claims but does not demonstrate that the moral will possesses causal efficacy (VM[LLA], 130). He says the will can be regarded from two perspectives as a mere volition and as a fact (VM[LLA], 132). He further claims that I participate through will in God, that reason exists in and through God, that there must be a single moral community, and that I always and infallibly know my duty.

### Conclusion: Fichte on Knowledge and the *Vocation of Man*

Fichte’s Jena writings after the *Kritik aller Offenbarung* (1792) are strictly secular in that the argument is presented on secular grounds independent of religious faith. In the *Vocation*, and after the *Atheismstreit*, Fichte integrates faith into his analysis of reason by attempting to found reason in

religious faith. Yet unless this claim is motivated on philosophical grounds and further supported by careful and convincing argument, it merely remains an interesting biographical detail with no more than dubious philosophical value. Observers could hardly be farther apart in their reading of the *Vocation*. Preuss, a translator of this text, believes Fichte is an epistemological skeptic, but Chisholm, who edited Smith's earlier translation of this same text, depicts him as animated by religious faith about the unity of the human world with the divine.

It is possible that Fichte himself is unaware of the change in his position. In the Foreword, he claims there is nothing in the book he has not already said in other writings (VM[LLA], 3). My impression is that there is a tidal change in this version of his position in that instead of grounding reason in itself he grounds it in faith. In the *Vocation*, under the pressure of social circumstances, Fichte retreats from the secular position worked out during the Jena period, and further retreats from the early analysis of real human practice by now taking a theoretical postulate as an analysis of human practice. If we are utterly and wholly free, then striving, or striving to be free, is neither interesting nor possible.

This change in his position illustrates his famous claim that the kind of philosophy one defends depends on who one is. As already noted, in this regard a retreat from this crucial point decisively weakens the position. A second result is to move closer to Kant's own dualism between freedom and necessity at the price of suppressing a basic early insight about finite human being in context. A third consequence is to follow Kant's path in reverse. In his later writings, such as the *Anthropology* and the *Critique of Judgment*, the author of the critical philosophical revises his conception of the subject in moving toward a philosophical anthropology, while Fichte apparently moves in the other direction.

Fichte's theory of human being as active presupposes a conception of freedom, which is a central element in his thought in this period.<sup>6</sup> He proposes two different models. In the Jena period, in reacting to Kant he depicts ethics as possible on a heteronymous basis for two reasons. On the one hand, the subject is always in a context, by which it is constrained, hence never wholly free. On the other hand, the subject strives to push out the limitations of the context by increasingly approximating to complete autonomy. In the *Vocation*, Fichte appears to drop or at least to downplay striving in taking a different line. In effect, he answers the Kantian claim

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6. See, for instance, his account of the "*Begriff von Freiheit*" in GNR (GA I/3, 345).

that ought implies can by saying that it is in fact so. I take him to be claiming that individuals do not merely strive<sup>7</sup> but in fact can and do act in a wholly unconstrained fashion in realizing their moral aims.

Fichte, in modifying this crucial point, moves closer to the critical philosophy but weakens his position. I detect a series of difficulties in this new position. To begin with, there is no argument on this crucial point for which Fichte substitutes mere faith. Second, a quasi-Cartesian assumption of total human freedom conflicts with the form of strict causality that Fichte, closely following Kant, appears to favor in the account of Doubt. Kant, who favors a view of the moral subject as a noumenon, has a resource that Fichte, who turns away from the thing in itself, cannot bring into play to argue that the subject is in fact free. Third, it is doubtful that, after the intervention of Freud, Marx, Nietzsche, and others, it is even plausible to depict the human subject as wholly unconstrained.

Fichte's religious view of the subject as wholly unlimited is a romantic misdescription of finite human beings. In leaving Jena, Fichte leaves behind his view of the subject as striving, hence limited, by incorporating faith into what was earlier a secular position. In one sense, he was, as he maintains, free to make a prephilosophical decision. Yet in another sense, he was not free at all but rather constrained by the traction of the world, in his case by his difficult circumstances in making a prephilosophical decision that, as he also suggests, occurs not outside of but rather within the constraints of the social context.

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7. See VM(LLA), 113: "It is not a goal which is given to us only that we may strive after it for the mere purpose of exercising our powers on something great, the real existence of which we may perhaps be compelled to doubt—it shall, it must be realized."



## Fichte's Conception of Infinity in the *Bestimmung des Menschen*

DAVID W. WOOD

The *Bestimmung des Menschen*, a text first published in Berlin in 1800, closes with two opposed geometrical images—those of a circle and an infinite straight line. For Fichte, these images are intimately related to a correct understanding of our “*Bestimmung*” or “vocation” as human beings. Once I grasp the true nature of my vocation, I see the universe become transformed from the image of an “ever-recurring circle, an incessantly repetitive game” into something much more positive and spiritualized: it now “bears the stamp of the spirit itself; continually progressing toward perfection in a straight line extending into infinity” (307).<sup>1</sup> Fichte also concludes with a view of the knowledge of our vocation, which at first glance might appear paradoxical: “I cannot grasp my full and entire vocation; what I ought to become, and what I will be, exceeds all my thought” (301).

Why does Fichte use the geometrical example of an infinite straight line to characterize the nature of human vocation? And why is our cognition unable to fully grasp our vocation? We shall see that these questions are closely interlinked.

Though commonly labeled a “popular” work, the *Bestimmung des Menschen* presents some of Fichte’s key epistemological principles. Here, I will argue that Fichte uses examples of mathematical infinity to illustrate his

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1. The page numbers in the text refer to the edition of the *Bestimmung des Menschen* in the *Johann Gottlieb Fichte Gesamtausgabe* (GA I/6, 189–309). Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own.



view of certain limits to cognition and the ultimately rational nature of the human being. His employment of mathematical images is an integral part of providing a presentation based on a lucid and rigorous *Denkart*, or mode of thought, which the “I” of the reader has to actively follow.<sup>2</sup>

But does not the *Bestimmung des Menschen* reach its apotheosis in *Glaube*, that is, some kind of mystical or religious “faith,” and hence constitute a very public break with the transcendental principles of his earlier Jena writings? Indeed, precisely with regard to the topic of infinity, we see in Book Three that Fichte directly equates God with *das Unendliche*—with the Infinite itself. The issue of a rupture in Fichte’s philosophy starting with the *Bestimmung des Menschen* is a controversial one and has been keenly debated by two centuries of Fichte scholarship. With the text, Fichte himself did not see any break with his Jena writings, but simply a tentative expansion of his earlier philosophical principles in order to start presenting a “*transcendental system of the intelligible world*,” as he terms it in a letter to Schelling in December 1800.<sup>3</sup> Fichte clarifies this expansion in subsequent letters, saying that the *Wissenschaftslehre* does not lack any key principles, but only “completion”; that is to say, it lacks its “highest synthesis, the synthesis of the spirit world.”<sup>4</sup>

His correspondence with Schelling from this time reveals how cautious Fichte had been in the language of the *Bestimmung des Menschen*, no doubt conscious of trying to avoid a repeat of the atheism controversy that had precipitated his departure from Jena in 1799.<sup>5</sup> In this connection it is worth noting that Fichte’s own feelings of religiosity had nothing to do with any kind of vague mysticism, but arose out of an almost mathematical lucidity. As he wrote to his wife in November 1799, just after completing the *Bestimmung des Menschen*: “In the elaboration of my present text I have

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2. Concerning this *Denkart* and the active role of the “I” of the reader, see Fichte’s *Vorrede* (Preface) to the *Bestimmung des Menschen* (ibid., 189f.).

3. See J. G. Fichte to F. W. J. Schelling, December 27, 1800: “I still have not been able to formulate these expanded principles in a scientific manner; the clearest hints about them are to be found in the third book of my *Vocation of Man*. An exposition of them will be my first task after the completion of my new presentation of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. In a word: a *transcendental system of the intelligible world* is still lacking” (GA III/4, 406).

4. J. G. Fichte to F. W. J. Schelling, May 31, 1801 (GA III/5, 45).

5. “As I made a move to carry out this synthesis [of the intelligible world] the cry of atheism went up” (ibid.). For a complete English translation of the Fichte-Schelling correspondence from May 1800 until the final letter of January 1802, see *The Philosophical Rupture between Fichte and Schelling: Selected Texts and Correspondence*, ed. and trans. M. G. Vater and D. W. Wood (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012).

attained a more profound view of religion than I have ever had. In me the movement of my heart only proceeds from perfect clarity; this attained clarity could not fail to also move my heart.”<sup>6</sup>

Although some elements of the language and style of presentation in Fichte's *Bestimmung des Menschen* are obviously different to his Jena works, I will endeavor to show that the main epistemological principles of his conception of infinity are continuous with those of his earlier writings.<sup>7</sup>

### *Bestimmung* as an Infinite Line or Infinite Approximation

Before looking at Fichte's conception of infinity in the *Bestimmung des Menschen*, it might be helpful to briefly recall his idea of *Bestimmung* or vocation itself. Fichte poses the question of our human vocation right at the beginning of Book One (Doubt). He says that as a knowing human being I can quite easily determine (*bestimmen*) many of the objects in the world around me. I can count and observe these objects, analyze and compare them with other objects. However, the procedure becomes rather more complicated when I seek to apply the same question to myself, and ask: “What am I, and what is my vocation (*Bestimmung*)?” (191). In Fichte's eyes the question of our vocation is not a frivolous or abstract one, but eminently practical, since it has a direct bearing on how we live our lives. Here *Bestimmung* can be viewed in two different senses: as either a limitation or as an ideal.<sup>8</sup> Moreover, as the first part of Fichte's question shows, our vocation is directly bound up with our view of ourselves. That is to say, answering the question of our vocation presupposes understanding a much more all-encompassing question: What is the human being? Through a series of arguments, over three books we arrive at Fichte's own response

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6. Letter of J. G. Fichte, in Berlin, to Johanna Fichte, in Jena, November 5, 1799 (GA III/4, 142).

7. In this sense, I am in agreement with Andreas Schmidt, who has argued for epistemological continuity in the *Wissenschaftslehre* as a whole. See his brilliant study: *Der Grund des Wissens: Fichtes Wissenschaftslehre in den Versionen 1794/95, 1804/II und 1812* (Paderborn: Schöningh, 2004).

8. Fichte's word choice here highlights the various senses of the German terms *bestimmen* and *Bestimmung*. While the former term is usually rendered as “determine,” the latter could be translated in English as “determination” (in the sense of a self-imposed limitation), or “vocation” and even “destination” (in the sense of an ideal). See Günter Zöllner's helpful discussion in: *Fichte's Transcendental Philosophy. The Original Duplicity of Intelligence and Will* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 1f.

to these interrelated questions. Firstly, for Fichte any genuinely free being must provide itself with its own vocation or determination in life; it must not be given to it from the outside or from any external authority. Secondly, the human being is a deeply rational entity and not simply a natural product, and therefore cannot be solely explained by recourse to natural, sensible, and mechanical laws. As he says toward the end of Book Three:

The human being is not the product of the sense world, and the final goal of his existence cannot be attained in the sense world. His vocation goes beyond time and space and everything sensible. He must know what he is, and to what end he ought to work. As sublime as his vocation is, his thought must be likewise capable of completely elevating itself above all the limitations of sensibility. (300)

In other words, the concept of vocation is not restricted to our finite sensible natures (our limitations), but also involves understanding ourselves as spiritual or moral beings, who are part of a culture, society, and an educational process (our ideals). In the 1794 lectures on the *Bestimmung des Gelehrten*, the acquisition of genuine culture, and the education to ever greater rationality, are described as the final goal of our vocation.<sup>9</sup> As in the *Bestimmung des Menschen*, this goal and its path are said to be infinite and unattainable:

Thus it is not man's vocation to reach this goal. But he can and he should draw nearer to it, and his true vocation qua man, that is, insofar as he is a rational but finite, a sensuous but free being, lies in endless approximation toward this goal.<sup>10</sup>

But why is the *path* of our vocation presented in mathematical images as either an infinite approximation or an infinite line? For Fichte, geometry arises from the *free* activity of the human being and consequently expresses the nature of the human being.<sup>11</sup> It is a question of the limitation of our

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9. "Man's final end is to subordinate to himself all that is irrational, to master it freely and according to his own laws." J. G. Fichte, *Some Lectures Concerning the Scholar's Vocation*, EPW, 152.

10. Ibid. The identical thought is expressed by Fichte in his *System der Sittenlehre* of 1798 (GA I/5, 141f.; SE, 142–43).

11. Cf. the *Zurich Wissenschaftslehre*: "Geometry arises through the free acting of my I, by moving the point into a line in space. Geometry could never arise solely from space and the point." (Lecture, February 27, 1794; GA IV/3, 24).

free activity: either our activity encounters limits and becomes finite and determinate, or it does not encounter any limits and remains infinite. We have to recall that the essence of the I for Fichte is nothing but *pure striving* or *pure activity*, and that this activity is *originally infinite*. In the *Grundlage des gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794–95, this pure activity or striving is again presented using the image of an infinite straight line: “We can picture this activity [of the I] extending into infinity using the image of a straight line, passing from A through B toward C, and so on”<sup>12</sup>—or using the natural scientific images of centripetal and centrifugal forces (directed into infinity) in order to underscore either the outward (practical) or inward (theoretical) reflected activities of the I.<sup>13</sup> However, both these centripetal and centrifugal directions of our activity “are grounded in the I and are one and the same.”<sup>14</sup>

It is therefore not surprising to see Fichte also employing in the *Bestimmung des Menschen* the geometrical image of the drawing of a line to represent the activity of the I or “inner agility of the spirit.” This image of the drawing of the line (not the fixed, finished line) is so instructive for Fichte because it provides him with a simple and direct intuitable image of our living and dynamic intellectual activity. At the end of Book Two, we read:

My spiritual faculty appears to inwardly move itself to and fro, to quickly travel from one [element] to another; in short: it appears to me as a *drawing of a line* [*Linienziehen*].—Determined thinking makes a point on this line. (237–38)

Moreover, it is important to note that already during the period of the discovery of the *Wissenschaftslehre* in Zurich, Fichte was clear that there is a *limit* concerning our cognition of this ideal activity or pure striving: this infinite “striving in itself” never “comes into consciousness,” and the ideal of this striving “cannot be attained.”<sup>15</sup> Hence, Fichte’s early designation of the *Wissenschaftslehre* in not simply the well-known words as a

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12. Fichte, *Grundlage des gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (GA I/2, 379).

13. *Ibid.*, 406.

14. *Ibid.*, 407.

15. “Receptivity strives toward a *certain matter* [Stoff]. Striving in itself, does not come into consciousness, but it is only represented through an appropriate sensation. . . . Everything that can be said about its explanation, are only nominal explanations, which push the issue further into infinity; namely, toward the ideal of striving, to give *oneself this matter*, which cannot be attained.” Fichte, *Practische Philosophie* (GA II/3, 195).

*StrebungsPhilosophie*<sup>16</sup> (a philosophy of striving), but also in the less-known mathematical terms as: “a theory of the *straight* line, but not at all a theory of the curved line (*theorie des courbes*).”<sup>17</sup>

But why is the goal of our striving or vocation unattainable, why can it never be reached? One way of comprehending these issues is to view them in the light of Fichte’s theory of mathematical infinity.

### Mathematical Infinity

Fichte discusses the notion of mathematical infinity a number of times in the *Bestimmung des Menschen*. Often the term *infinite* (*unendlich*) is used as a predicate, such as in the infinite line, infinite division, infinite reason, the infinite will, etc., and occasionally the term is employed as a substantive, for example, the Infinite (*das Unendliche*). I propose classifying everything to do with measuring, counting, and dividing in the text as belonging to his theory of *mathematical* infinity. In essence, Fichte’s concept of mathematical infinity is that of a rule, procedure, or task that we can carry out *ad infinitum*. There is no limit to this process. Any termination or completion signifies for Fichte that the process has now become *finite* or determinate, and one has therefore ceased dealing with a genuine form of mathematical *infinity*.

For example, in Book One of the *Bestimmung des Menschen* Fichte employs the concept of infinity in the sense of *unlimited* possibilities, or probabilities. He asks the question, why has Nature, among the infinite number of manifold determinations that it could assume, assumed *this* particular one, and not another one? (cf. 193ff.). For Fichte, scientific knowledge and explanations of nature involve the operations of counting, dividing, measuring, and comparing. Essentially, all these operations are different types of determining (*bestimmen*). Explaining an object scientifically means comparing it with another object, and in this way we relate it back to something simpler or known. However, the *activity of explaining itself* is conceptual, and therefore belongs to the realm of finitude.<sup>18</sup> How far can we determine, compare, measure, or explain the objects of nature and ourselves? There appears to be no limit. As soon as we think we have

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16. Ibid., 265.

17. Ibid., 259.

18. “Who is it then who does this explaining? Finite nature itself. As soon as we say ‘explain’ [*erklären*], we are in the realm of finitude [*Endlichkeit*].” Fichte, *Grundlage des gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (GA I/2, 412f.).

arrived at the final “number” or comparison, or at a final explanation or ground, we can legitimately pose the question again: What is the cause or origin of this ground? We are beings who are “inexhaustible in explaining” (213), and we can continue this process “indefinitely” (194). Fichte gives a name to the mental faculty of carrying out this indefinite and inexhaustible process, it is called *speculation*. In Book Three, Fichte inquires: “What can hinder speculation to ask and to keep asking *ad infinitum*?” (256).

Book Two contains one of Fichte’s most frequently employed examples of mathematical infinity: that of the *infinite divisibility of space*. The “I” (*Ich*) in Book Two says to the Spirit that it can carry out this process of “dividing into infinity, not with instruments, but in thought” (223). This procedure is considered to be infinite, because we can never terminate or complete it. If we were to complete this division it would mean that we had reached a limit to our division, that is, that we had reached something fixed or *finite*. In principle, however, there is nothing to prevent us from trying to divide again. This process can never be completed or executed, that is to say, never in *actual* time or space—“I cannot carry it out” (223). As Fichte points out in the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* (1796–99), the operation of infinite divisibility holds for whatever is “determinable” (*Bestimmbare*) in space. In fact, this operation is valid for every single sphere of our freedom, and so it can be also carried out with time and matter.<sup>19</sup>

### The Dispute over the Infinite Polygon

The aim of Fichte’s reflections on infinite divisibility is to not only determine the constitution of space and time, but to furthermore reveal the underlying structure of all discursive thought. This is nowhere more apparent than in a mathematical dispute Fichte was involved in from his time in Jena—the dispute over the so-called infinite polygon, more commonly known as the squaring (quadrature) of the circle.<sup>20</sup> This dispute shows that

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19. “Absolute freedom makes its selection from this ‘something’ lying within the sphere of the determinable. It cannot be constrained in making this choice, for then it would not be freedom. It can go on like this endlessly—choosing more or less [of this ‘something’]. No part is prescribed to absolute freedom as the last. This infinite divisibility will have many consequences (concerning space, time and things). Everything [within this sphere] is infinitely divisible, because it is a sphere for our freedom.” Fichte, *FTP*, 156 (Cf. *GA* IV/2, 50).

20. For an extensive overview of this dispute, see Paul Ziche, *Mathematische und naturwissenschaftliche Modelle in der Philosophie Schellings und Hegels* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1996), esp. 40–132.

Fichte was deeply aware of the problems associated with mathematical infinity throughout his Jena period.<sup>21</sup> It was sparked by Fichte's "Question for the Mathematician" footnote in *Über den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre* (1794),<sup>22</sup> and concerned the problem of squaring a circle using inscribed or circumscribed polygons with an infinite number of sides. Fichte considered the quadrature of the circle to be impossible. His argument hinges on the heterogeneous nature of the circle and the straight line. We could summarize Fichte's conception of these fundamental geometrical elements as follows:

1. Only straight lines are genuine lines. This is because the concept of a line implies the notion of straightness and direction. The element of direction is absent from a circle, hence it cannot be classified as a line.
2. A curve or curved line (*krumme Linie*) therefore consists of stringing together infinitely many points that are infinitely close to each other.
3. What is the origin of the circle? The circle originally arises when we assume the I to be a center or center-point [*Punkt*], and draw an infinite number of radii from it. However, our limited, restricted imagination needs to set endpoints to these radii. These endpoints are then conceived as a single unity or collection. The original circle is none other than the boundary line of infinite space (*Grenzlinie des unendlichen Raums*), whereas the finite circle is generated by the synthetic activity of our imagination.<sup>23</sup>

What does this mean for the squaring of the circle by means of a polygon with an infinite number of sides? Fichte is absolutely clear: *squaring*

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21. In fact, this example of the quadrature of the circle as an activity of infinite approximation can be already found in the early Zurich text, *Practische Philosophie* (GA II/3, 183–84).

22. Fichte, *Über den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre*, GA I/2, 129–39 footnote, 135, in section §5. (Cf. Fichte, *EPW*, 120–21).

23. Ibid. Again, see the similar presentation in Fichte's *Practische Philosophie*: "A curved line [circle] and a straight line are wholly *heterogeneous*, and merely the arbitrary procedure of limitation through points gives them something in common.—It appears: however, that every straight line is infinite; and every curved line is finite. . . . The round line [*runde Linie*] arises through a movement at the boundary of infinite space. The I, the *point* moves itself, and never as it wants, but always as it does not want. . . . Actually all lines are straight lines" (GA II/3, 217, 244, 249).

the circle is impossible due to the absolutely heterogeneous natures of a line and a circle. No matter how small the line or side of the polygon becomes in relation to the curved line (circumference) of the circle, the former will always possess something the latter can never have: *direction*. Therefore, the complete identification of the straight line with the circumference can never be completed. Fichte elaborates on this in a small text of 1796 entitled "What Are We to Make of the Infinite Polygon?"<sup>24</sup> Here the task or procedure for dividing the sides of the polygon *ad infinitum* is actually the task of infinitely determining or *measuring*. If you are continually dividing the sides of the polygon, you will never be in the position of actually measuring, since one has to stop to do this. If you stop, however, your polygon will be something determinate or finite; in other words, you will have a polygon with measurable, finite number of sides. For Fichte, it is therefore a misnomer to call this geometrical object an *infinite* polygon, and he criticized the notion of an infinite polygon for containing "internal contradictions" (those of a completed infinity and directionality in the circumference of the circle). Fichte's own concept of mathematical infinity is that of a procedural rule or task that can never be completed:

What are we to make of the infinite polygon?—It is an internal contradiction. Because infinite simply signifies the progressive rule of proceeding that never, however, terminates. . . . The infinite polygon already contains an inherent *continuity* of direction, and this cannot be done away with. What lies then in the circumference [of the circle]? There is no direction there. . . . However small the quadrature you use, it still always contains direction: and it belongs to the nature of the circle that it should never have any [direction]. We can never get away from the original synthesis. It is absurd to say: the infinite is. It "should" merely be: it is a task. The whole [problem] boils down to this.<sup>25</sup>

This small text formed the basis for Fichte's similar comments in the *Foundations of Natural Right* (1795–96),<sup>26</sup> where he said that any mathematician who believed he had *actually* arrived at a polygon with an infinite

24. "Was ist von einem UnendlichEk zu halten?" (GA II/5, 5).

25. Ibid.

26. Cf. Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right*: "What then is the concept of something that is infinite? Is it the concept of a task of dividing the side of the polygon to infinity, and hence the task of *infinite determining*?" (FNR, 8).



number of sides only possessed an “empty concept of the infinite.”<sup>27</sup> For such a mathematician had confused the *determinate procedure* for describing the infinite with the infinite itself.<sup>28</sup> Fichte’s philosophical intuition of an inherent contradiction between the straight line and the circumference of a circle, and hence the impossibility of ever completing the measurement of an infinite polygon (of squaring the circle), turned out to be correct. The mathematician Ferdinand Lindemann demonstrated this mathematically in 1882 by showing that the number  $\pi$  is transcendental.<sup>29</sup>  $\pi$  is of course the ratio of the diameter (straight line) of a circle to its circumference. This ratio never terminates; in other words, it is an *infinite* process or procedure, and therefore the classic quadrature of the circle (using a straightedge and compass) is impossible to complete in finite space and time.

What is interesting about these Jena discussions on mathematical infinity and the infinite polygon is that they harmonize with Fichte’s general philosophical convictions concerning human cognition and human vocation. Firstly, Fichte argues that the practical (or vocational) tasks of the human being are infinite in number, scope, or degree. It would only be possible to accomplish these tasks by a completed approximation to infinity. But as we saw, such a completion contradicts the very notion of infinity, so it is never possible to accomplish these tasks. Nevertheless, these tasks are still immediately given to us as infinite.<sup>30</sup> Secondly, though human knowledge is *infinite* in its tasks or degrees, the *laws* of human cognition are *finite*, and can therefore be completely determined, exhausted, and enumerated within a philosophical system.<sup>31</sup> This is why Fichte can say that the

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27. Fichte’s remarks are primarily directed at Jakob Sigismund Beck. In a review of Fichte’s *Über den Begriff der Wissenschaftslehre*, Beck had misunderstood Fichte’s “Question for the Mathematician” as referring to *incommensurability*. In the *Foundations of Natural Right*, Fichte rejects Beck’s criticisms and says that he was not talking about incommensurability (of the circle’s diameter and circumference) but the impossibility of measuring, of the quadrature of the circle as such (cf. *FNR*, 8). Günter Buhl already pointed out Beck’s misunderstanding in 1977. See Günter Buhl, “Über eine Bemerkung Fichtes zur Quadratur des Kreises,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 59 (1977): 281–88.

28. “[Y]our polygon is finite and not infinite, as you profess. But because you can comprehend the procedure for describing something that is infinite (i.e. because you can comprehend the empty concept of the infinite) and can label it, for example, with an A, you are no longer concerned about whether you have really acted and can act in this way” (*FNR*, 8).

29. Cf. F. Lindemann: “Ueber die Zahl  $\pi$ ,” *Mathematische Annalen* 20 (1882): 213–25.

30. See Fichte, *Concerning the Concept of the Wissenschaftslehre* (EPW, 116, footnote).

31. “The tasks confront us and are to be exhaustively enumerated. But they are not completed and cannot be completed” (Marginal note by Fichte; *ibid.*).

*Wissenschaftslehre* possesses totality, because for him it furnishes a complete system of the laws of cognition, all of which can all be traced back to a self-evident first principle (*Grundsatz*).<sup>32</sup>

### God as “the Infinite”

Toward the end of Book Three of the *Bestimmung des Menschen*, Fichte discusses again this seemingly paradoxical nature of human knowledge being both finite and infinite. Because they are discursive or conceptual, each step of our comprehension is a *finite* step or a single element of knowledge. I may extend these finite steps as far as I wish, yet I will never reach the end of this infinite process. Fichte now makes an important distinction between this infinite process and the Infinite as such:

What I comprehend becomes through my mere comprehending something finite; and though infinitely increased and heightened it can never become transformed into the Infinite. You [the Infinite Will] are not different from the finite according to degree [Grade], but according to type [Art]. Through the above increase they only make you into an ever larger and larger human being; however, never into God, into the Infinite, which is not capable of any measurement.—I only have this discursive progressive consciousness, and cannot conceive of any other. (297)

It should be clear from this passage that the Hegelian charge that Fichte only held a conception of *schlecht* or “bad” infinity does not stand up to scrutiny.<sup>33</sup> Fichte does not make any sort of “qualitative” distinction about infinity here, or consider the *in*-finite as simply the opposite of the finite. Instead, he makes a fundamental distinction between degree and species or *type*. To the extent that they are unlimited and can never be completed, Fichte’s examples of mathematical infinity—such as an infinite line, infinite approximation or infinite divisibility—are indeed examples of Hegel’s bad

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32. On the other hand, all other sciences are *infinite* for Fichte, their subject matter can never be completed or exhausted because they do not extend back to their *Grundsatz*. (Ibid.).

33. For a detailed analysis of Hegel’s accusations against Fichte, see Ziche, *Mathematische und naturwissenschaftliche Modelle*, 53–82; and Wayne Martin, “In Defense of Bad Infinity. A Fichtean Response to Hegel’s *Differenzschrift*,” *Bulletin of the Hegel Society of Great Britain* 55/56 (2007): 168–87.

infinity. Crucially, however, Fichte sees these examples of infinity as having their foundation and ground in *the Infinite as such*. Terms such as measurement, qualitative or quantitative, simply do not apply to the Infinite, for it is beyond all measurement and only has its ground in itself.<sup>34</sup>

As discursive cognizing beings, we are fundamentally different in type from God or the Infinite. Nevertheless, like the faculty of cognition in general, the knowledge of our vocation may also be said to be both finite and infinite. On the one hand, the knowledge of my “entire complete vocation” “exceeds all my thought” (301), and thus “one part of this vocation remains hidden even to myself” (301). On the other hand, although the goal is infinite, we *can* know something about our vocation. As with measuring each side in the quadrature of the circle, we can set about following the path of our vocation step by step. That is to say, we can fully know our vocation as a procedure or task: “That part [of my vocation], however, which is divulged to me, I know, I know it thoroughly, and it is the root of all of my other knowledge” (301). Fichte’s conception of vocation in the *Bestimmung des Menschen* must therefore be interpreted in the light of his theory of cognition.

In the *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794–95, Fichte had already similarly argued that the activity (striving) and cognition of the I to be both *finite* and *infinite*. However, our I is infinite *only* in terms of its striving; if we attempt to conceptualize this striving we render it finite.<sup>35</sup> Or to put it another way, the I is infinite *only* insofar as it is “pure activity,” to wit, when it does not have any determinate object. As soon as the activity of the I encounters or sets itself limits, its activity is no longer concerned with itself but with a determinate and external object, or Not-I.<sup>36</sup> Here again, Fichte draws attention to the limits of our discursive consciousness.

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34. Fichte’s distinction here recalls Spinoza’s different types of infinity in his famous letter to Meyer from April 1663 (Letter 12). Spinoza too argued for an infinite “that must be infinite by its nature or by virtue of its definition” and an infinity that is “unlimited not by virtue of its essence but by virtue of its cause.” See Baruch Spinoza, *The Ethics and Selected Letters*, ed. S. Shirley (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1982), 231–35.

35. “The I is infinite, but merely according to its striving; it strives to be infinite. However, the concept of striving itself already contains finitude, for whatever does not encounter any opposition is not striving.” Fichte, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (GA I/2, 404).

36. “In what sense is the I posited as infinite, in what [sense] is it posited as finite? . . . The *pure activity* of the I alone, and the *pure I alone*, is infinite. However, the pure I is that which does not have any object, but reverts back into itself. Insofar as the I posits limits [Schränken] . . . its activity (of positing) does not pass directly to itself, but to an opposed Not-I.” (Ibid., 392–93).

Because consciousness depends on determining or reflection, it can only be finite. Therefore, the infinite activity of the I as such

can never come into consciousness, nor is it ever able to come into consciousness, because consciousness is only possible through reflection, and reflection only through determination. As soon as it reflects upon itself, however, it necessarily becomes finite.<sup>37</sup>

As a consequence, finite reflective reason can never explain the self-consciousness of God. Reflective reason is bound to the "law of determination"; but because in God the reflected and the reflecting (consciousness itself and its object) cannot be distinguished, God remains "forever inexplicable and incomprehensible" to it.<sup>38</sup> Thus, in terms of its complete unknowability for finite determinate reason, Fichte's Infinite in the *Bestimmung des Menschen* should be bracketed alongside the Unconditioned, the Absolute, and the Eternal.<sup>39</sup> They too cannot be completely known or given any predicates, but exist in and through themselves, and are all beyond time, space, and measurement. This becomes clear from Fichte's dispute with Schelling over the nature of the Absolute. For Fichte, any designation or expression [*Äußerung*] we employ of the Absolute must reflect this state of affairs: it can "only be an expression that is thoroughly One, simple, and eternally equal to itself."<sup>40</sup> As for the Absolute *itself*, however, it does not possess any predicates, all we can say is that it *is the Absolute*. As Fichte famously says in a letter to Schelling from 1802:

The Absolute *itself*, however, is neither being, nor cognition, nor identity, nor the indifference of the two: but it is precisely—the Absolute—and to say anything else about it is a waste of time.<sup>41</sup>

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37. Ibid., 403.

38. Ibid., 407.

39. Fichte himself draws this comparison in a commentary on Schelling's *Darstellung meines System der Philosophie*. With regard to the term *infinite* in point §10 of Schelling's book, Fichte asks: "What does 'infinite' mean here? *Eternal? Absolute?* Without any connection to time? Then the proposition is to be conceded, but merely as an identical concept, because it is already immediately contained in the thought of absoluteness." Fichte, *Zur Darstellung von Schelling's Identitätssysteme* (GA II/5, 492).

40. Letter of J. G. Fichte to F. W. J. Schelling, January 15, 1802 (GA III/5, 112).

41. "und jedes zweite Wort ist vom Uebel." Literally: "any second word is detrimental" (ibid., 113). Fichte had already put forward the same view in his letter to Schelling of October 8, 1801: "The Absolute would not be the Absolute if it existed under some kind of form" (GA III/5, 91).

In Book Three of the *Bestimmung des Menschen*, the discussion is not of the Absolute but of the nature of the Infinite. Nevertheless, this same inability to express or grasp it in totality remains: "I cannot grasp the unlimited [*Unbegrenztes*], for I am finite" (243). All our intellectual concepts or specific acts of consciousness are only ever finite acts, and are therefore never valid for the Infinite or for God: "Yes, I am well aware that the concept of an act and a particular act of consciousness only holds for me, but not for you, the Infinite" (297).

Fichte's conception of God as an unknowable Infinite belongs to the neo-Platonic tradition of the *via negativa* or negative theology.<sup>42</sup> That is to say, we can never fully grasp the divine or the Infinite, but only express it in negative or finite terms, in what it is not. It is particularly interesting to compare Fichte's thoughts here on the Infinite with those of Nicholas of Cusa (Cusanus). In his principal work *De docta ignorantia*, Cusanus also employs the mathematical examples of the squaring of a circle and infinite approximation to demonstrate the infinite activity of the human mind. And like Fichte, the Infinite or God remains for Cusanus forever inaccessible, forever beyond our discursive knowledge and all determining or comparison.<sup>43</sup>

It would be wrong to interpret Fichte's conception of faith in the *Bestimmung des Menschen* as a rejection of philosophical knowledge, or as taking refuge in some kind of transcendent mysticism.<sup>44</sup> For Book Three already foreshadows that profound analysis into the systematic foundations of cognition that will form the cornerstone of the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1801–02.<sup>45</sup> Inquiring into the ground of our scientific knowledge, Fichte argues at the beginning of Book Three:

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42. For an analysis of Fichte's neo-Platonism with respect to the doctrines of *logos* and the One and Many in the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1804 (2nd version), see Emmanuel Cattin, "Le néoplatonisme de Fichte," in *L'être et le phénomène. Sein und Erscheinung. J. G. Fichte. Die Wissenschaftslehre (1804)*, ed. J.-C. Goddard and A. Schnell (Paris: Vrin, 2009), 439–51.

43. "Propter quod infinitum ut infinitum, cum omnem proportionem aufugiat, ignotum est." Nicholas of Cusa, *De docta ignorantia*, Book I, ch. 1, ed. H. G. Senger (Hamburg: Meiner, 1994), 6–8. English translation: "Hence, the infinite qua infinite, is unknown; for it escapes all comparative relation." *Complete Philosophical and Theological Treatises of Nicholas of Cusa*, ed. Jasper Hopkins, volume I (Minneapolis: Arthur J. Banning Press, 2001), 5.

44. For Fichte, it is a sign of mysticism to actually believe that infinity can be attained in time: "[T]he fulfillment of our entire vocation is not possible in any time. (The error of the mystics is that they represent the infinite, which cannot be attained in any time, as something that can be attained in time" (SE, 143).

45. In the *Wissenschaftslehre* from 1801–02 Fichte presents his system as a *Wissen vom Wissen* (knowledge of knowledge) or *Absolutes Wissen* (absolute knowledge); that is to say, as a system of knowledge able to ground every other type of knowledge. However, here too is it never a question of knowledge of the Absolute as such. (Cf. GA II/ 6, esp. 139–44).

No knowledge can ground and prove itself; all knowledge presupposes something still higher, as its ground (*Grund*), and this ascension has no end. (257)

Fichte then gives a name to this foundation for all knowledge, a name that has caused all manner confusion and misunderstandings on the philosophical side. He calls it *Glaube* (faith). For him, it is first this "faith" that provides all our knowledge with "certainty," "conviction," and rids it of "deception." And in terms of our vocation: "[O]nly this view allows us to fulfill our vocation" (257). No doubt, the fresh scandal of the atheism controversy played a role in Fichte's choice of the term *faith*. On the other hand, there are clearly also epistemological reasons, such as the above problem of the unknowability of the Infinite.

### Conclusion—The Transition Problem

Fichte's conception of infinity in the *Bestimmung des Menschen* gives rise to a number of further questions that can only be touched on here: If the finite can never be extended to reach the infinite, how can we say anything about the latter at all? What is the transition from the finite to the infinite or vice versa? Or are they so opposed that no relationship can exist between them? Here, we arrive at an exceedingly complex aspect of Fichte's conception of infinity—the problem of the transition between the finite and the Infinite. Fichte was to analyze and meditate on this issue for the remainder of his life. He believed he had made progress upon Spinoza<sup>46</sup> by attempting to tackle this problem, and criticized Schelling for apparently overlooking it.<sup>47</sup> With his implicit references to the need for a future "system of the intelligible world," Fichte believed he had already hinted at the solution to this problem in the *Bestimmung des Menschen*. To conclude, I will briefly summarize these hints.

46. In fact, Fichte thought that Spinoza had not even posed the question about these transition points from the infinite substance to its accidents: "[Spinoza] does not ask at all about these transitions: hence fundamentally there is none, his substance is not one, nor is his accident, but he only sometimes terms it so, and does not really address the issue" (GA II/6, 228).

47. "Or again, how does the *One* first become the *Infinite*, and then a totality of the manifold?—This is the question that a consistent speculation still has to solve, and which you necessarily have to ignore because you already find this form at once in and with the absolute." Letter of J. G. Fichte to F. W. J. Schelling, October 8, 1801 (GA III/5, 91).

In Book Three, Fichte lists three important elements, which may be regarded as initial transition points between the finite and the Infinite. These are our freedom of will, our rationality, and the voice of our conscience. All three are intimately connected with our vocation.

Firstly, it is relatively easy to set ourselves an ideal goal or vocation; what is more difficult, of course, is acquiring the ability to carry it out. In other words, our vocation concerns both our reason and our *will*, and the “decision” to *freely* follow the demands of our reason “is the first and highest in my spirit” (278). Our will is the living link between two worlds, a *visible* one of external “deeds” and the *invisible* one of decisions—“my will is what encompasses both” (280). The pure will or will in itself does not have its origin in “material” nature but is part of a “supersensible world,” and its “perfection depends solely on myself” (280). Correctly understanding my vocation depends on this perfecting of my will: “New light is shed on my existence and my vocation only through the fundamental improvement of my will” (289).

Secondly, according to the basic principles of Fichte’s philosophy, the will in itself is actively led by reason, or by “self-active reason.” However, “self-active reason is will” (291). This pure rational form of will only has itself as its guide and does not depend on any “sensible matter” (292). Its active rationality makes it the “spiritual link with the rational world,” and in this sense Fichte also calls it the “infinite will” (292f.) or “eternal will” (296). Here, we see the deeply rational nature of Fichte’s entire philosophy and conception of the human being. Ultimately, all the limitations of our finite reason point to the existence of an “infinite reason.” For “only reason is infinite in itself” (296), and only infinite reason can account for the Infinite and its limitations.<sup>48</sup> As Fichte argues, “[W]hat else could limit reason apart from what is reason itself, and limit all finite reason apart from infinite [reason]?” (295).

Finally, this allows us to see how it is precisely two elements in our human nature that especially permit us to participate in the infinite will and infinite reason—these are our *freedom* of will and the voice of our *conscience*. Like an “oracle from the eternal world,” the inner voice of conscience instructs us in our duties and in every situation in life, and is therefore an unfailing guide along the infinite path of our vocation (291).

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48. See Fichte’s letter of December 29, 1801 to Johann Baptist Schad in Berlin: “Only reason has the *Infinite*, because it can never grasp the Absolute; and only the Absolute, which however can never enter into reason except in a *formal manner*, is the *One*, thoroughly only qualitatively, never quantitatively etc.” (GA III/5, 102).

For Fichte, the freedom of the will and the voice of our conscience show us that our true origin lies in the Infinite itself:

The voice of our conscience, which furnishes everyone with his particular duty, is the ray of light on which we proceed out of the Infinite, and places us there as single, particular beings. It fixes the limits of our personality and is therefore the original constitution, ground and material of all the life that we live. The absolute freedom of the will, which we likewise take with us from the Infinite down into the temporal world, is this principle of our life. (293)





## Intersubjectivity and the Communality of Our Final End in Fichte's *Vocation of Man*

KIEN-HOW GOH

Fichte first attempted to formally deduce the reciprocal interaction of rational beings in the 1796 *Foundations of Natural Right*, but continued to revisit the topic after that. The view expressed in Book III of the 1800 *Vocation of Man* is the result of at least two other attempts on his part to refine his views on the issue, and is worth our careful consideration. In a draft of a letter to Reinhold shortly after completing the latter work, Fichte admitted that though he is convinced of the “principles of [his] system,” he had nonetheless erred in the “deductions” of some of its propositions, citing in particular his “skimpy reasoning” in the part of the 1798 *System of Ethics*, namely, the last part of Section III of §18, dealing precisely with the issue. What is more, he claimed to have corrected the errors in the *Vocation of Man*.<sup>1</sup> Though it is evident that Fichte takes himself to have introduced

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1. “Dieser Dinge, d. h. der Principien meines Systems bin ich so sicher, da ich nie, wenn ich nicht wahnsinnig werde, daran wieder zweifeln kann. Und da sollte ich noch lernen wollen?—In den ferner liegenden Sätzen meines Systems, in den Ableitungen, kann ich mich geirrt haben; und werde es ohne Zweifel häufig. Ich selbst entdecke schon hieß und da Irrthümer; habe Sie in meinem Auditorio öffentlich zurückgenommen; und thue es vor dem großen Publikum dadurch, daß ich in andern Schriften anders lehre. [So habe ich in meiner Bestimmung des Menschen das überfliegende Raisonement (meine Sittenlehre S. 300 ff.) zurückgenommen, sowie schon vor 1½ Jahren auf dem Ratheder].” Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Briefwechsel II* (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1967), 269.

some important improvements to his account of intersubjectivity in the latter work, it proves to be difficult to put our finger on just where the improvement lies. This is due not only to the unsystematic mode of exposition he adopts in that work, but also to the mysterious interrelations he apparently assumes to hold between intersubjectivity and the divine world-order there. In what follows, I propose a way of understanding how Fichte views the account of the *Vocation of Man* as an improvement over that of the *System of Ethics*, which might shed some light on how he takes intersubjectivity to be related to the divine world-order. I will explain the account of the *System of Ethics*, suggest a difficulty with it, and go on to examine how Fichte goes about addressing the difficulty in the *Vocation of Man*.

In a recent study of Leibniz's influence on Fichte, Marco Ivaldo argues that Fichte's appeal to predetermination in the *System of Ethics* stems from his approaching the question of intersubjectivity in terms of Leibniz's doctrine of preestablished harmony, a doctrine he admits to the Danish student Højjer to be a "good" but still "rather dogmatic" hypothesis. The reciprocal interaction of rational beings presupposes predetermination because like the rest of the sensible world, the free actions of other rational beings are given to each of us as points of our original limitedness (*ursprüngliche Beschränktheit*). According to Ivaldo, the "revision of the *Vocation of Man* does not concern the interpersonal theory as such, but the understanding of the nature of limitation. . . . What is revised is the move of having taken the limited points to be preestablished *a priori*, without having clarified that this apriority cannot be a type of apriority that is determined according to simple theoretical laws of reason."<sup>2</sup> While I agree with Ivaldo that a helpful way to understand the development of Fichte's theory is to see him as attempting to rid it of its last vestige of dogmatism, I think the difference lies not so much in the "understanding of the nature of limitation" as it is in the way the limited drive itself is understood: in the *System of Ethics*, Fichte accounts for our perception of other rational beings solely in terms of the formal condition of the ethical drive (what he also calls the "pure drive" or the "drive for self-sufficiency"), whereas in the *Vocation of Man*, he does so in terms of the ethical drive *considered in its material determinateness* (what he also calls our "final end" [*Endzweck*]). In the former, he derives the command to seek universal agreement of our convictions by

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2. Marco Ivaldo, *Fichte e Leibniz: La comprensione trascendentale della monadologia* (Milano: Guerini e associati, 2000), 155.

reciprocal interaction from our perception of other rational beings; in the latter, he reverses the deductive order by accounting for our perception of other rational beings by the command to seek universal agreement of our convictions by reciprocal interaction.

To see how such a reversal marks an improvement, we have to first clarify how Fichte goes about demonstrating intersubjectivity in the *System of Ethics*. He continues to argue there, as he has done in the *Foundations of Natural Right*, that the summons of at least one other rational being is a necessary condition of I-hood. To posit myself as an I, I must first be given to myself as freely self-determining, and this is possible only through another's summons to freely determine myself. What is distinctive about the account of the *System of Ethics* is that he goes a step farther to demonstrate our perception of rational beings who play no role whatsoever in bringing us up to be an I. It is worth pointing out here that Fichte seeks to demonstrate *not* that there are in fact these beings, but that we perceive them when we encounter them. That there are in fact rational beings other than those required for us to be an I "cannot be deduced but is a particular limitedness, and in this respect it is for us, viewed from the standpoint of experience, something contingent."<sup>3</sup> The very same question is raised once again a year-and-a-half later in Section IV of Book III of the *Vocation of Man*: "How do [other finite rational beings] enter my world, and I theirs?—since the principle according to which the consciousness of ourselves and our effects, and of their sensible conditions, is developed out of ourselves . . . is this principle simply not applicable here then? How are free spirits informed of free spirits?"<sup>4</sup>

As far as the *System of Ethics* goes, Fichte's response to the question is that we perceive other rational beings either by being summoned, such as the way we have originally been summoned to become an I, or by perceiving something that displays the concept of a concept, that is, an artifact. In either case, our "drive to acting" is repulsed, that is to say, limited by "certain points beyond which [we] ought not to proceed with [our] freedom, and this *ought-not* reveals itself to us immediately. [We] explain these points to [ourselves] by the existence [*Vorhandenseyn*] of other free beings and their free effects in [our] sensible world."<sup>5</sup> Since these points are

3. SS, §18, Sect. III; GA I/5, 204; SW IV, 225; SE, 214. See also SS, §19, I; GA I/5, 229; SW IV, 254; SE, 243.

4. BM, Bk. III, Sect. IV; GA I/6, 294; SW II, 300; VM, 108.

5. SS, §18, Sect. III; GA I/5, 205; SW IV, 226; SE, 214. See also SS, §23, Sect. I; GA I/5; SW IV, 277; SE, 264.

given to us as points of our original limitedness, the free actions of other rational beings are predetermined: “*predetermination* cannot be removed, for if it were removed, then the reciprocal interaction of rational beings—and hence rational beings as such—could not be explained.”<sup>6</sup>

It is remarkable that Fichte does not simply take it for granted that the effects of other free beings “in my sensible world” are none other than their effects in theirs. In other words, he seems to be concerned over the possibility of the failure of my perception of your actions to agree (*übereinstimmen*) with your perception of them (and conversely, of your perception of my actions to agree with my perception of them). Though he thinks that a free being is only what he does, he does *not* seem to assume that other free beings’ effects in my sensible world are directly constitutive of them. For him, the points of my original limitedness that ground (*gründen*) these effects determine “what I will experience,” but “not from whom”<sup>7</sup> I will experience it. Thus, besides claiming that “all free actions are predetermined through reason for all eternity,” Fichte feels compelled to add that “*with regard to perception* every free individual is placed in harmony with these actions.”<sup>8</sup> In his eyes, even if all our actions are determined “prior to” and “outside of all time,” there would still be no genuine communication and reciprocal interaction between us *unless our perceptions of each other’s actions agree*.

This sort of worry can be generalized to include objects other than our actions in each other’s world. Reciprocal interaction presupposes that the sets of originally limited points that ground each of our worlds are inter-related in such a way that they ground one and the same world—that is to say, the world of my perception agrees with that of yours. I want to suggest that in the account of the *System of Ethics*, the role of the “good hypothesis” of preestablished harmony to which Ivaldo has rightly drawn attention lies precisely in its securing such an agreement. As such, its dogmatic status is bound to render the account unsatisfactory for Fichte. For given that reciprocal interaction presupposes such an agreement, Fichte cannot take himself to have succeeded in providing a thoroughly transcendental account of the possibility of reciprocal interaction, so long as he fails to uncover any transcendental ground for our belief that other rational beings perceive one and the same world as we.

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6. SS, §18, Sect. III; GA I/5, 206; SW IV, 226–27; SE, 215.

7. SS, §18, Sect. III; GA I/5, 206; SW IV, 227; SE, 216.

8. SS, §18, Sect. III; GA I/5, 207; SW IV, 228; SE, 216; emphases added.

Before considering the account of the *Vocation of Man*, it will be helpful for us to have some idea of the role of intersubjectivity in Fichte's conception of the divine world-order. At around the time of the publication of the *System of Ethics*, Fichte famously became embroiled in a controversy involving the charge that his philosophical system is atheistic, a charge that led finally to his discharge from the University of Jena and move to Berlin in early 1799. There is no question that the *Vocation of Man* (not to mention Book III of the same) is conceived as a forceful response to the charge. Yet it by no means follows from this that a treatment of intersubjectivity is merely incidental to the work's overall aim and design. As Wolfgang Schrader has rightly pointed out, the very concept of God as Fichte deduces it in the 1798 *On the Ground of Our Belief in Divine Governance*—namely as a *moralische Weltordnung*—essentially involves the effective reciprocal interaction of rational beings.<sup>9</sup> In an important letter to Schelling shortly afterward, Fichte intimates that the *Atheismusstreit* could have been avoided had he earlier accomplished in his system a “highest synthesis,” what he characterizes as a “synthesis of the world of spirits” (*Synthesis der GeisterWelt*).<sup>10</sup> According to Schrader, the groundwork for the synthesis is already prepared in the *System of Ethics*, where Fichte qualifies his earlier exhortation for everyone to become God (viz., be as absolutely self-determining as possible) by the clause “to the extent that one is permitted to—that is, so long as one preserves the freedom of all individuals.”<sup>11</sup> However, as a mere condition for I-hood as such, the postulate of a “community of saints” (*Gemeine der Heiligen*) of the latter work does not suffice as a “real ground of the separateness [*Getrenntheit*] of rational beings.”<sup>12</sup> It is only after having undergone the controversy and deduced the concept of God in *On the Ground* that Fichte comes to accomplish the synthesis proper in the 1798 *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* and the *Vocation of Man*.

9. See Wolfgang Schrader, *Empirisches und absolutes Ich: Zur Geschichte des Begriffs Leben in der Philosophie J. G. Fichte* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann, 1792), 112–13.

10. “Es fehlt der Wissenschaftslehre durchaus nicht in den Principien, wohl; aber fehlt es ihr an Vollendung; die höchsten Synthesis nemlich ist noch nicht gemacht, die Synthesis der Geisterwelt. Als ich Anstalt machte, diese Synthesis zu machen, schrie man eben Atheismus.” Fichte, *Briefwechsel* II, 323. The distinction Fichte draws here between the basic principles of the *Wissenschaftslehre* and its detailed completion is remarkably echoed in his above-cited draft of a letter to Reinhold. See Note 1.

11. SS, §19, I; GA I/5, 231; SW IV, 256; SE, 245.

12. Schrader, 119. See also Fichte's 31 May 1801 letter to Schelling. See Fichte, *Briefwechsel* II, 322–27.

In the light of Schrader's argument, we can begin to see why Fichte might be prepared by the time he writes the *Vocation of Man* to go beyond demonstrating our perception of other rational beings in terms of the purely formal "drive for self-sufficiency" and the I's ensuing reflection on it, to account for both our "reciprocal cognition and interaction" at once in terms of the "one eternal infinite will" that discloses itself to us as a "voice of conscience" (*Stimmung des Gewissens*), the voice in us that urges us on to fulfill our moral vocation or final end. The account is most straightforwardly stated at the beginning of Section IV of Book III:

This reciprocal cognition and interaction of free beings already in this world is quite incomprehensible according to laws of nature and of thought, and are explainable only through the One in which they hang together, though for themselves they are separated, through the infinite will which conserves and supports all in its sphere. . . . The inner voice of that will, which speaks to me only so far as it imposes duties on me, calls to me: here respect the image of freedom on earth, here a work which bears its imprint. And this alone is the principle through which I recognize you and your work, in that conscience commands me to.<sup>13</sup>

Unfortunately, this passage does not by itself specify where the difference of the account therein from that in the *System of Ethics* lies. Could not the prompting of the inner voice of the will for us to respect the image of freedom on earth be understood as just a metaphorical way of expressing the repulsion of our "drive to acting" by certain points on which we ought not to act? If so, how does the account of the *Vocation of Man* differ from that of the *System of Ethics*?

As I have argued, Fichte is dissatisfied with his transcendental grounding of our perception of other rational beings in the *System of Ethics* primarily because it fails to provide us with any reason to think that the worlds of their perceptions agree with the world of ours, that is, we perceive one and the same world. This is evident in the *Vocation of Man* in the way Fichte closely associates the question of our perception of other rational beings with that of "[h]ow [we can] account for all of our agreement of feelings, which are after all something positive, immediate and unexplain-

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13. BM, Bk. III, Sect. IV; GA I/6, 294; SW II, 301; VM, 109.

able? . . . This agreement of all of us about the underlying sensible world given as it were in advance as the sphere of our duty, which when looked at for what it is, is just as inconceivable as our agreement about the products of our reciprocal freedom.”<sup>14</sup> As I see it, Fichte fully realizes by this time that a thorough transcendental account of the possibility of reciprocal interaction must include a satisfactory answer to the question of the “agreement of feeling, intuition and laws of thought” of rational beings. If this is right, his answer to the latter question in the *Vocation of Man* must be read as an integral part of his answer to that of the “reciprocal cognition and interaction of free beings.” This is important for my argument. For it is in the course of responding to this question that he once again takes up the issue raised earlier concerning our final end in the text, this time characterizing it as decisively *communal* (*gemeine*).

Even so, it can be seen that Fichte already begins to lay the groundwork for a communal conception of our final end before discussing the “reciprocal cognition and interaction of free beings.” He characterizes the “one eternal infinite will” as a “spiritual [*geistige*] bond” of “all finite rational beings” and “a world or system of multiple individual wills: that unification and immediate reciprocal interaction of multiple self-sufficient and independent wills with each other.”<sup>15</sup> Though, as we have noted, the conception of reason as a “totality of rational beings” or “community of saints” is already present in the *System of Ethics*,<sup>16</sup> its systematic locus is importantly different there. In the *System of Ethics*, the communality of reason plays no role whatsoever in accounting for *our perception* of other rational beings. Contrarily, it is on the assumption that we, as a matter of fact, perceive other rational beings that Fichte goes on to deduce the communality of reason, specifically construed as our final end. Schrader makes essentially the point when he argues that as an “explication of ‘mere I-hood,’” the “abstract [‘logical’] postulate [of the ‘community of saints’] does not explain the possibility of the real separateness of rational beings.”<sup>17</sup> By contrast, Fichte simply assumes in the *Vocation of Man* that our final end involves “multiple individual wills,” that “it is meant for all, that it be produced by all as one great free moral community,”<sup>18</sup> and goes on to

14. BM, Bk. III, Sect. IV; GA I/6, 295; SW II, 302; VM, 110.

15. BM, Bk. III, Sect. IV; GA I/6, 293; SW II, 299; VM, 107–108.

16. See SS, §19, Sect. I; GA I/5, 229–30; SW IV, 255; SE, 244.

17. See Schrader, 114–18.

18. BM, Bk. III, Sect. IV; GA I/6, 298; SW II, 306; VM, 113.



account for our “reciprocal cognition and interaction” by it. This marks no step backward. For, as we have noted, Fichte does not ever take the business of philosophy to be one of demonstrating that there are rational beings other than those required for us to be an I, but only that we perceive them when we encounter them.

It is important to note that Fichte does not mean by “immediate reciprocal interaction” that we possess some supersensible epistemic access to others that completely bypasses their sensible effects in our world or our perception of them. For he goes on to add that “[t]he cognition we have of each other does not flow immediately from you to me, and from me to you. We are for ourselves separated by an insurmountable barrier. Only through our common [*gemeinschaftliche*] spiritual source do we know each other.”<sup>19</sup> As in the *System of Ethics*, we perceive others by perceiving their sensible effects in our world through the “voice of conscience.” But since our acting has consequences in the very world from which the voice issues—the world that is none other than the supersensible “world or system of multiple individual wills”—Fichte no longer takes it to be a mere matter of fact that our acting has consequences in others’ worlds. Nevertheless, this does not still quite amount to establishing *the agreement* of the consequences of my acting in their worlds with those in mine.

To follow Fichte’s line of thought in the *Vocation of Man*, we must appreciate the full import of our final end for him. Apart from whether there are other rational beings or whether our final end is communal or not, our final end does not just determine what *we* are for, but also what *the objects that make up our world as a whole* are for. As Fichte argues in Section V of §15 of the *System of Ethics*, we cognize the relative ends of objects as we reflect on the drive. When we reflect on the drive as liberated from the object that limits it, “our limitation by means of the object becomes something that can be expanded in a regular way and in a certain order; moreover, such an expansion of our own boundaries would also serve to change the object . . . in doing this we determine its purposiveness, its usefulness of certain freely chosen ends that one might set for oneself with regard to this object.”

Accordingly, we cognize the objects’ relative ends in their full range, that is, their final end, when we reflect on our ethical drive (*sittliche Trieb*) in its entirety. As I see it, the drive behind the “voice of conscience” in the *Vocation of Man* should be understood as the ethical drive of §15 of

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19. BM, Bk. III, Sect. IV; GA I/6, 294; SW II, 301; VM, 109.

the *System of Ethics*, and not the “drive for self-sufficiency” of §18 of the same. It is supposed to express the “drive for self-sufficiency” in its material determinateness, thereby yielding substantive insight into objects’ final end.

Considered in itself, the “drive for self-sufficiency” is what is pure in us—the moral law itself—and is to this extent the same in all of us. Considered in its material determinateness, however, the drive varies in each of us. So, to take a prominent example, the moral law demands that I treat you but not myself as an end, while it demands conversely that you treat me but not yourself as an end. It addresses itself uniquely to each of us when its demand on us is considered in its concrete specificity.<sup>20</sup> In this sense, we and our worlds do *not* share a common final end. Yet there is another sense in which we and our worlds do share a common final end: The moral law demands of each of us that we do not obstruct and frustrate the realization of another’s final end, but support and contribute to it as best we can. The only systematic way in which the former can be avoided and the latter optimized is “if different individuals divide among themselves the various things that have to be done to further *reason’s* final end.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, each of our final ends involves our fulfilling our duties from within the context of a communal set-up, to wit, performing what Fichte calls a “particular duty.” Once we take into account the moral law’s material-determinate demand that we do not hinder but promote others’ final ends, we come to see that we have to commit ourselves to cooperating with others in seeking to bring about our final end. In other words, our final end turns out to be communal. Furthermore, we and our worlds turn out to share a common final end insofar as each of our final ends is communal.

The communality of our final end is none other than the “highest synthesis,” the “synthesis of the world of spirits,” which, as Schrader has shown, amounts in turn to God, or, in Schrader’s preferred term, “divine life.” “This consideration by no means formally contradicts the determinations of the 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre*, but can be understood as an attempt at substantiating it. For Fichte had only said there that a principle of life lies in the I without qualifying the character of the principle.”<sup>22</sup> With the onset of the *Atheismusstreit*, he felt the need to elaborate on how the pure infinite striving of the 1794 *Wissenschaftslehre* qua divine life constitutes the unity and separateness of all of us who go to make up the supersensible “world of

20. See SS, §19, Sect. I; GA I/5, 230; SW IV, 255–56; SE, 244.

21. SS, §19, Sect. III; GA I/5, 232; SW IV, 258; SE, 247; emphasis added.

22. Schrader, 118–19.

spirits.” This effort finds its conclusion in Book III of the *Vocation of Man*, where divine life is construed as the ground not only of our perception of other rational beings, but also of the agreement of our perceptions of our worlds and our actions in it.

Since, as Fichte goes on to elaborate in Section V of §18 of the *System of Ethics*, “our final end is not ourselves but everyone,”<sup>23</sup> each of our worlds has one and the same final end. And to the extent that our worlds share one end, they are one and the same world. In this way, the communality of our final end serves as a transcendental ground to secure “all of our agreement of feelings.” The world of my perception and *your* actions in it necessarily agree with the world of your perception and your actions in it and vice versa, because we and our worlds are *for* nothing other than the realization of the “one great free moral community.” Given that the “spiritual world plan” is the “eternal plan of our ethical education and the education of our whole species,” it follows that our acting “ha[s] consequences *only* on other free beings: for in this and for this *alone* is there a world; and *the world is nothing more than [eben] that of which all agree.*”<sup>24</sup> “All that occurs in this world serve the improvement and education of human beings, and through this, the bringing about of their earthly [*irdische*] end.”<sup>25</sup> Moreover, our final end is fully determinate with respect to its matter (i.e., at any given time, there is something each of us ought to do as a member of a community to contribute to turning the community into a more free and moral one). As Fichte has already gone to great length in the *System of Ethics* to show, this involves our being commanded by duty upon encounter with other rational beings not just to passively avoid interfering with their acting, but to actively seek out reciprocal interaction with them in order to procure their agreement on how to realize a free and moral community, as well as their cooperation to do the same. As he puts it there, “He who separates himself from others surrenders his end . . . for it ought to be his final end to care for the entire human species.”<sup>26</sup>

In sum, I agree with Ivaldo that Fichte’s dissatisfaction with the account of the reciprocal interaction of rational beings of the *System of Ethics* stems from its unhappy reliance on the dogmatic hypothesis of pre-established harmony, and that he seeks to rid it of its last vestige of dog-

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23. SS, §18, Sect. V; GA I/5, 227; SW IV, 253; SE, 241.

24. BM, Bk. III, Sect. IV; GA I/6, 299; SW II, 307; VM, 113; emphases added.

25. BM, Bk. III, Sect. IV; GA I/6, 299; SW II, 307; VM, 114.

26. SS, §18, Sect. V; GA I/5, 212; SW IV, 234–35; SE, 223.

matism in the account of the *Vocation of Man*. However, the dogmatism of the account of the *System of Ethics* consists not in its concession that our actions are predetermined, but in its assumption that our perceptions of the predetermined actions agree. Accordingly, Fichte attempts in the *Vocation of Man* to rid his account of this assumption by securing the agreement of each of our worlds and our perception of each other's actions in it on the transcendental ground of the common final end of all of us to bring about one free and moral community. Moreover, Fichte virtually identifies our communal final end with God Himself. So if my argument is right, the *Wendung* from Fichte's Jena focus on the finite I to his post-Jena focus on God is perhaps better understood as resulting from his insistence on a more thorough and consistent application of the principles of transcendental philosophy than from his abandonment of them.



## Evil and Moral Responsibility in *The Vocation of Man*

JANE DRYDEN

### The Horrific World

In the third part of the *Vocation of Man*, Fichte argues that the world as we experience it is so awful that we cannot rationally accept that it is all there is—it simply cannot be the case that life exists just so that it can die (VM, 81). He provides a lengthy list of the harms that surround us in this world, beginning with those inflicted by nature, such as (paraphrasing slightly): bad weather, floods, storms, volcanoes, diseases that cause the deaths of children and mature adults, plagues, loneliness, loss of parents or family, hurricanes, and earthquakes (VM, 82), and finally the recalcitrance of inert and hostile primeval forests, deserts, and swamps (VM, 83). The harms that he lists are framed as those that serve to damage or limit the possibilities of human beings; he is not concerned here with harms inflicted upon or suffered by nonhuman creatures. The harm done by nature is not the fault of the victim—the “industrious and prudent man is abandoned to hunger and misery through no fault of his own” (VM, 82). These harms squander the potential of rational agents—it seems to him a waste that “immortal spirits must still direct all their thought and ingenuity and all their effort to the soil that bears their nourishment” (VM, 82).

There is hope for all these poor souls, of course. Fichte is optimistic that science and technology, properly harnessed, will ultimately weaken the power of these evils such that the natural world will present a friendlier face to us: cultivated, it will promote our ends, rather than thwarting them

(VM, 83). Nature, thinks Fichte, is not ultimately destined to remain a problem for us.

What he is more concerned about are the evils caused by our own free agency: "Man's most cruel enemy is man" (VM, 83). Examples are cannibalism and war (VM, 83),<sup>1</sup> oppression of the masses by the elite, and the petty infighting even among those who fight for "the good," who pursue their own particular conception of the good and accuse those who disagree of betrayal (VM, 84–85). The work of science, which ought to go to improving the lot of humankind, instead goes to supplying navies with weaponry to seek out men to destroy (VM, 84).

Fichte is convinced that this situation cannot last forever, "unless the whole of human existence is a purposeless and meaningless game" (VM, 85). Human societies can and will progress in their cultural development, and ultimately will all come together into one true state, in which "all temptation to evil, indeed the very possibility of anyone's rationally deciding upon evil behavior, will be fully eliminated, and man will be given all possible encouragement to direct his will to the good" (VM, 89). The improvement of the human species, of course, is intended to eradicate evil, and faith in the belief that this is possible is what drives Fichte's conclusions in third part of the *Vocation of Man*.

### The Problem of Evil

In these few pages, then, Fichte has rehearsed a number of the classic examples of evil. While he only uses the actual word *evil* (*Böse*) in reference to those harms inflicted by free agents, the two sets of examples he gives nonetheless echo the division is traditionally found within the philosophical problem of evil, between physical evil (harm caused within the natural world such as natural disasters, disease, and the like), and moral evil (harm caused by human agency). This distinction allows for various responses to the problem of evil, which is not focused on evil itself, but on whether the existence of evil in the world is compatible with the existence of a God that is both good and omnipotent.

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1. He characterizes the killing in war as murder (VM, 83), echoing his prohibition against the use of snipers (and unnecessary killing) in war in the second appendix to the *Foundations of Natural Right* (FNR, 328).

Those who defend the existence of God argue that moral evil can be explained away in terms of the “free will defense,”<sup>2</sup> which states that a world that includes beings with free will is better than a world without such beings, and it is not God’s fault what those free beings choose to do. Meanwhile, physical evil can be explained in terms of God’s overall plan—that some agents must undergo deprivation for the good of others, but that this is ultimately for the good of the whole.<sup>3</sup> Apparent physical evil can also be explained as just punishment for sin, or as teaching a valuable lesson to sinners in order to forestall future evil.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, both moral evil and physical evil can be seen to be unavoidable consequences of greater goods, and compatible overall with the existence of a good God.<sup>5</sup>

Fichte is not attempting to defend the existence of God in the *Vocation of Man*, but we can see the connection between the traditional problem of evil and Fichte’s argument about the ultimate vocation of humanity by considering the way in which evil still poses a problem for us. Even if we are not concerned with defending or disproving the existence of God in the face of evil, the existence of evils in our world still shocks us. Even if we believe that the physical world is governed largely by the workings of chance, in our actions and planning we still display a pragmatic belief in its rationality and order—after any natural disaster, for instance, the news media are still full of attempts to find meaning for the event. Significant evils—whether physical or moral—surprise us and seem to require some sort of accounting. Further, in the context of our growing technological advancement and scientific understanding of the world, the question of what evils may be laid at the doorstep of human responsibility rather than the natural order seems even more of a pressing concern. On the one hand, climate change science shows links between human actions and natural disasters; on the other hand, research in neuroscience casts doubt on how much humans really are responsible for their actions. The problem of evil,

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2. See Alvin Plantinga, *The Nature of Necessity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974), for a relatively recent articulation of this argument, which can also be found in Augustine (*Confessions* 7.3 and 7.16) and Thomas Aquinas (*Summa Theologica* 1a, Q. 49, 1 ad. 3).

3. We can see this response in Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* 1a, Q.49, 2.

4. Augustine, *Confessions* 7.3.

5. Objections to these arguments include J. L. Mackie, “Evil and Omnipotence,” *Mind* 64, no. 254 (1955): 200–12, which shows that these arguments against the problem of evil are logically inconsistent with God’s omnipotence.



thus, is not merely an old theological issue but a persistent problem, and can be used as a heuristic for focusing our questions about the extent of human agency and responsibility. Therefore, while Fichte himself does not take up this approach, looking at his philosophy in the *Vocation of Man* through the lens of the problem of evil and its distinction between physical and moral evil can help to clarify our interpretation of this text, and how it can still speak to us.

At first glance, it seems easy to map the traditional distinction between physical and moral evil onto Fichte's text: evil arising from nature occurs through "blind mechanism" and is unfree, such that no one is responsible for it; in contrast, evil done by human beings arises out of free agency, and thus someone must be responsible. The story may be more complicated, however, in two different ways. First, Fichte holds that nature is to be cultivated and controlled by human beings so that it is no longer a source of harm; this may imply that the continuing harm done by nature is the result of humans' failure to have sufficiently tamed nature. If this is so, the harm may be attributable to free human agency and thus is no longer an obvious instance of physical evil.

On the other hand, Fichte repeatedly states that those who fail to conform their wills to the moral law are still in the power of the mechanism of nature. Even though we must think of them as free, their actions are conceived of as part of the operation of nature and its mechanism of necessity, making them sound more like instances of physical evil.

The purpose of this chapter is thus not to develop a Fichtean account of God's doing or of religion, but to examine the scope of *human* responsibility and complicity in evil, both physical and moral.

### The Place of God

It is worth investigating, first of all, whether evil is a matter of human (as opposed to divine) responsibility for Fichte, given the reputation of the *Vocation of Man*. After all, it was written largely in reaction to the Atheism Controversy, and is known for its religious tone. As Fichte noted to his wife, he considered religion "more deeply than I have ever done" while editing the text.<sup>6</sup> The third part, on Faith, concludes with highly religious

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6. Letter to Johanna Fichte, 5 November 1799, quoted in Ives Radrizzani, "The Place of the *Vocation of Man* in Fichte's work," in *New Essays on Fichte's Later Jena Wissenschaftslehre*, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 319.

language, reminiscent of Augustine's *Confessions* in its being directed toward a "You" who is an "Eternal One" (VM, 120), a "Sublime living Will, which no name can name and no concept encompass" (VM, 111). In his choice of language, Fichte evokes the idea of a God who has a divine plan that we should seek to align ourselves with even though we can never comprehend it entirely. Faith in this sort of God would provide support for faith in our vocation—even though all seems dark, God has matters in hand, in some sort of sublime mystery.

On the other hand, considered within the scope of Fichte's philosophy as a whole, the importance of human agency reasserts itself. In Fichte's 1798 essay, "On the Basis of Our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World," which spurred the Atheism Controversy, Fichte doesn't claim that God created the moral world-order, but rather "is the moral world-order."<sup>7</sup> Curtis Bowman points out that "God, if we bother to use the term at all, can be nothing other than the moral world-order produced by the self-positing activity of the I."<sup>8</sup> With respect to *The Vocation of Man*, Ives Radrizzani argues that "the God of the third book of the *Vocation of Man* occupies exactly the place devoted to the pure will in the *nova methodo* and coincides with it."<sup>9</sup> Consequently, "God can only be said to be the transsubjective basis of the human community as a transcendental idea of practical reason."<sup>10</sup> The "God" in the text is not the theist God, but simply "the order and law of the supersensible world."<sup>11</sup>

If this is the case, then the problem of evil in Fichte's thought takes on the more modern character alluded to above—the problem of our ability to make sense of the world, not the existence of a theist God per se. Even taking the text at face value, though, we see that Fichte does not claim that God will deal with evil; the religious language ultimately points to the work to be undertaken by the human species as a whole.

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7. Curtis Bowman, "Fichte, Jacobi, and the Atheism Controversy," in *New Essays on Fichte's Later Jena Wissenschaftslehre*, 290. The sentence continues: "that God cannot be conceived apart from the moral world-order."

8. *Ibid.*, 290.

9. Radrizzani, 335.

10. *Ibid.*, 336.

11. *Ibid.*, 335. Radrizzani goes on to point out that Fichte does not claim any knowledge, as such, of God. Similarly, he does not claim knowledge, as such, of the network of individual human vocations that makes up the bond between all human actions. See Radrizzani, 336: "the idea of a bond between all human enterprise, of a harmony between the diverse particular vocations that criss-cross, in short, the idea of a moral order, is simply part of the argument of belief and not of knowledge."

What exactly we are responsible for, and how far can our hope for the eradication of evil extend? Even if Fichte's arguments are not seen in the context of a traditional theodicy or defense of God, they still echo the traditional arguments in theodicy, since they still depend on a view of the world as ultimately rationally ordered. We cannot act if we view the world as absurd, our actions all for naught: "[A]s a rational being, which is already given a purpose through its mere decision, I cannot act simply for nothing, for the sake of nothing" (VM, 92).

In the *Vocation of Man*, Fichte appeals to a supersensible or supernatural world as the ultimate justification for our vocation (VM, 91–97, esp. 94–95), such that even if our conscience-motivated actions in the sensible world go awry, they are still redeemed through their consequences in the supersensible world (VM, 95). This supersensible world is our true home (VM, 96), not the flawed earthly world (see VM, 81, 96). The status of this claim, with its implied metaphysical dualism, is hard to interpret, but regardless of the ontological status of the supersensible world, the hope it generates gives us the courage to go on acting in the earthly, sensible world. To redeem this hope, we need to act morally, but we also need to make the world itself—nature itself—conform to reason. In order to understand what this will entail, let us return to the traditional language of the problem of evil.

### Blurring the Distinctions—Rousseau, the Lisbon Earthquake, and *Contemporary Disasters*

The distinction between moral and physical evil hinges on the distinction between those beings that are free and those which are not. It assumes that the evil caused by nature is distinct from that caused by free agents. This is reasonably straightforward in the context of guidance for orienting ourselves to the afterlife rather than concern with how we physically reshape our earthly environment. It becomes more difficult when we see ourselves not as innocent victims of harm but as complicit in the state of our surroundings. We can see this play out in Rousseau's response to the Lisbon earthquake.

Church leaders attributed the Lisbon earthquake, which destroyed almost two-thirds of the city and killed anywhere from ten thousand to sixty thousand people (depending on the source),<sup>12</sup> to just retribution for

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12. Claudia Sanides-Kohlrausch, "The Lisbon Earthquake, 1755: A Discourse about the 'Nature' of Nature," in *Is Nature Ever Evil?*, ed. Willem B. Drees (New York: Routledge, 2003), 108.

sin, applying arguments familiar from Augustine. Voltaire criticized this view, arguing that surely those in Lisbon had no more vices than those in London or Paris. Those who suffered—particularly the children—had committed no crime or error, and it was heartless to claim that the disaster was the result of God being constrained by eternal laws.<sup>13</sup>

Rousseau worried that Voltaire's poem could lead one to despair, since denying an understanding of the quake as divinely sanctioned seemed to suggest that there was no way to make sense of, or respond to, suffering.<sup>14</sup> Voltaire was correct to assert that the earthquake was not divine retribution for sin, but wrong to disconnect it entirely from human action and human moral responsibility. Saying that the source of moral evil was in humanity, and that "most of our physical misfortunes are again our own work,"<sup>15</sup> Rousseau argued that the damage and suffering from the earthquake would not have been as great had the city been constructed differently.

In other words, something that fits the model of being a standard physical evil—a natural disaster—can also be understood as a moral evil, the result of human actions. As Rousseau wrote, "For me, I see everywhere that the misfortunes that nature subjects us to are much less cruel than those which we add to them."<sup>16</sup> If they are our doing, however, then that implies we can work to fix them.

### Complicity in Physical Evil

In addition to shaking confidence in God, the Lisbon earthquake also shook confidence in the Enlightenment idea of nature as "well ordered and good,"<sup>17</sup> and there for our purposes. Writing in the aftermath of this shaken confidence, Fichte sees nature, in its uncultivated state, as an opponent to freedom and reason.<sup>18</sup> If we seek a rational order to the world, it will not

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13. Voltaire, "Poem on the Lisbon Disaster, or: An Examination of that Axiom, 'All is Well'" (1756).

14. Rousseau suggested that Voltaire's poem tells us, "Suffer forever, unfortunate one. If it is a God that created you, doubtless he is all-powerful; he could have prevented all your misfortunes. Don't, therefore, hope for them to end, for one wouldn't ever know why you exist, if it is not to suffer and die." Jean-Jacques Rousseau, "Lettre de J. J. Rousseau à M. de Voltaire," 18 August 1756, *Oeuvres Complètes de Jean-Jacques Rousseau*, vol. 4 (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1969), 1060 (translation mine).

15. *Ibid.*, 1061.

16. *Ibid.*, 1062.

17. Sanides-Kohlrausch, 114.

18. As he writes in SE 108 . . . 109, "Nature as such . . . is characterized by its opposition to freedom."

come from nature itself, but from reason's triumph over nature. Throughout his works, he tells us that it is part of our moral duty to cultivate nature and bring it under our control.<sup>19</sup> In the *System of Ethics*, in particular, he writes that "the entire sensible world is to come under the dominion of reason, to be the tool of reason in the hands of rational beings. But everything in this sensible world is connected with everything else; hence no part of it stands entirely and without restriction under the dominion of reason unless all the parts do so" (SE, 285). Consequently, everything in nature should be made into someone's property, such that "all of nature is comprehended and grasped under this unified will" (the unified will of all rational agents) (SE, 285). As we saw above, it is not God's task, but ours, to solve the problem of physical evil and make nature into our tool rather than our opponent. The question, then, is whether we can be held to account for the physical evil that remains while we have not yet achieved a rational order.

In Fichte's earlier work, such as the *Lectures on the Scholar's Vocation*, it seems as though the task is supposed to be unending: we are instructed to overcome nature not because Fichte expects that we will ever succeed, but because it is a task that serves as part of our moral vocation as individuals; it gives each of us a direction in life, an ideal to pursue. He tells us that our "struggle with nature" is "a war that can never end" (EPW, 164).<sup>20</sup> The fact that we shall never achieve our goal is not something to be disconsolate about, but rather a source of strength. Because the task we are called to by our vocation will never come to an end, we ourselves become eternal through participation in our vocation.<sup>21</sup>

If this is the case, then the current physical evil remaining in the world is not something that we ought to be blamed for, even though, as it is part of our vocation to overcome it, we can still be said to be responsible for it. It is at least not a failure, if our task is understood as literally unend-

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19. In addition to VM 82–83, see "Some Lectures Concerning the Scholar's Vocation," in EPW, 163–65; FNR, 189 ("promoting organization in nature is the very foundation of the state"); and SE, 263, 285.

20. The text continues: "so long as we are not supposed to become gods. However, nature's influence should and can become weaker and weaker, whereas reason's dominion should and can become stronger and stronger."

21. J.G. Fichte, "Some Lectures Concerning the Scholar's Vocation," EPW, 168. As he writes, "Once I assume this lofty task I will never complete it. Therefore, just as surely as it is my vocation to assume this task, I can never cease to act and thus I can never cease to be." Our unending vocation makes us eternal: "For I have seized my vocation, and it is more permanent than you [nature's tumult]. It is eternal, and so am I!" (EPW, 169).

ing, literally eternal. The presence of physical evil in the world should not thus cause us to question the fundamental rationality of it all, but should remind us of our ongoing vocation.

Our vocation is described differently in the *Vocation of Man*. In this text, the complete cultivation of all nature is described as something that could actually occur, and Fichte argues that we must think of it as something that will actually occur, in order to make sense of the world right now. He describes those natural disasters that still plague us as “nothing other than the last resistance of the wild mass against the lawful, life-giving purposeful march of progress . . . nothing other than the last convulsive strokes in the formation of our planet, which is now reaching completion” (VM, 82). If this is the case, then the remaining physical evils in our world are not mere reminders of our vocation, but also reminders that we have not yet finished what we are expected to complete.

Fichte sees the complete subjugation of nature as a natural continuation of a process that is already going on, and thus does not give an argument for his optimism in this regard. It is now more than two hundred years since the publication of *Vocation of Man*, and we are far from having achieved what Fichte described as “a condition which allows one to calculate and reckon safely on its regular pace” (VM, 83). To what extent are we responsible for this failure?

In his response to Voltaire, Rousseau pointed to human responsibility for the consequences of human action, even if these seem to be manifest as natural events. On this line of reasoning, we could be said to be responsible today for sins of commission—choosing to build in certain areas prone to disaster, pumping greenhouse gases into the air, pumping toxic chemicals into rivers. We would then see the harmful results of these not as physical evil, but as moral evil.

If we conceive of the unruliness of nature as the failure of our moral duty to have cultivated it entirely, then we must also consider the evil that results from our failure. In this case, the harms caused by sins of omission—failing to build adequate levees, or failing to plan adequately for drought—would also be seen as instances of moral evil. If it is the case that all of nature shall be brought under the dominion of reason, then physical evil as a whole reduces to moral evil.

But how should we take this claim, in the *Vocation of Man*, that nature *will* in fact one day be entirely under our control? The 2010 eruption of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano, which created an ash cloud that disrupted flights for weeks, serves as a potent reminder of the power of nature to unexpectedly shut down our normal activities. Philip Alcabes, discussing

our fear of epidemics and our inability to truly plan for them, argues that nature is always able to come up with new, unforeseen threats.<sup>22</sup> Fichte's optimism seems misplaced: it is either the result of an incorrect empirical assumption, or it is interwoven with a metaphysical assumption about the completeness of our task that is discontinuous with his earlier work.

Let us reconfigure the question away from speculation about the future and back to what it means for our ability to live in the world now. The purpose of Fichte's text is not to explain physical evil, but to point to the mission of human beings and spur them to action. It is not up to God to save us, since the point is not the particular arrangement of the world itself, but that this arrangement be the result of free human action.<sup>23</sup> If the point of the world were solely for humans to live peacefully and untroubled by evil, then, as Fichte writes, "freedom would then not only be in vain but it would even interfere and the good will would be quite superfluous. The world would have been arranged most clumsily and would proceed toward its goal wastefully and circuitously" (VM, 93). This echoes Kant's claim in the *Groundwork* that if happiness were our purpose in life, then nature has been arranged particularly badly.<sup>24</sup> To understand Fichte properly, we should not focus on the metaphysical possibility of the actual overcoming of nature, but on our own practical responsibility.

It is our freedom that allows us to take responsibility for the natural world. In order to understand how to conceive of our responsibility or guilt with respect to the natural world and what would normally be conceived of as physical evil, we need to turn to the question of our freedom as moral agents, and thus the possibility of moral evil.

### Moral Evil and the Mechanism of Nature

According to the *System of Ethics*, insofar as we ourselves are organic wholes that are part of nature, we possess a drive for self-preservation (SE, 117). When we aim at enjoyment or satisfying appetites, we are primarily exer-

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22. Philip Alcabes, *Dread* (New York: Public Affairs, 2009), 186.

23. "It no longer seems to me that the final purpose of the present world that a state of universal peace among men and their unconditional control of the mechanism of nature be produced merely for its own sake, but rather that it be produced by human beings themselves" (VM, 113).

24. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 4:395.

cising this drive—the natural drive. Our ability to reflect about ourselves, however, shows that we are not limited to these actions or these aims. Our tendency to reflection and to resolving to determine ourselves through reason can be expressed as a pure, spiritual drive.

From the standpoint of philosophy, these two drives are the same original drive, which is itself the result of my own free action, experienced by me in two different ways (SE, 124–25). I can experience the drive as the natural drive and myself to be an object within the framework of natural causality; or I can experience the drive as spiritual and myself as a subject. The difference between the two lies in my own reflection. When I reflect upon myself, I as reflecting subject stand against myself as object (SE, 125). I am thus not part of nature, but stand against nature. By determining my will, I am thus something more than merely part of the grand chain of causality (see SE, 147). Our task as humans is ultimately to unify our desires such that our actions as natural agents are aligned with our rational determination.

By the third section of the *Vocation of Man*, Fichte seems once more to be working with this sort of framework, after having explored the ramifications of thinking of ourselves as objects in the first section, and pure knowing subjects in the second. Our thoughts and inclinations emerge from our drives. If we are not aware of this, our drives compel us, but once we do become aware, then we begin to shape our thinking freely; as he writes, “[C]ompulsion disappears as soon as it is seen” (VM, 73). Our vocation, of course, is to come to see it.

In order to grasp the meaning of our vocation, we must have already understood that we are free despite appearances. But if we have not yet done this, how can we even begin to start? As Kierkegaard wrote forty years later, “It would indeed be unreasonable to require a person to find out all by himself that he does not exist”<sup>25</sup>—in Fichtean words, that he was not yet truly a free self-determining self. In reflecting freely upon ourselves, we stand against nature; in failing to have done this, we are consequently still within the grip of nature, not in control of ourselves (VM, 119).

Fichte argues that we should not be disconcerted by those who engage in “unreason and vice,” since they are “not in control of themselves” and we should not be “angry with blind nature devoid of will” (VM, 119). If these human beings are not really free, then the moral evil in the world is the result of those human beings who are still within the power of the

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25. Søren Kierkegaard, *Philosophical Fragments*, ed. and trans. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 22.



mechanism of nature. Fichte seems to mean this quite seriously, as he writes that out of duty, "I must always treat them and speak with them as though they were free, knowing very well that they are not" (VM, 120).

If this is the case, however, then the distinction between moral and physical evil again becomes unclear. We saw earlier that physical evil ultimately becomes the responsibility of free moral agents, and thus can be understood in the context of moral evil. But now it seems as though moral evil can be seen as part of the mechanism of nature, and thus as an instance of physical evil. If this is so, then responsibility for evil would seem to disappear altogether.

This would not be a desirable Fichtean outcome. There are two levels at which to understand the claim about unfree human agents. The first is advice about where the reader should focus his or her energy; it is Fichte's counsel that we should not despair that we cannot convince everyone of the existence of our vocation. This is fitting in an exhortatory text such as the *Vocation of Man*, and further echoes Fichtean advice elsewhere to accept that not all philosophers will be capable of idealism, but will rather remain dogmatists (IWL, 20). As such, it is primarily counsel against annoyance or indignation, and not a claim about responsibility for evil.

The second level is a claim that Fichte seems to be making about whether these humans are really free or not. His language in this section seems to indicate that they are not free, regardless of how duty compels us to treat them; as he writes, "What they really are [*was sie wirklich sind*] does not deserve this anger" (VM, 119/BM(*pb*), 155). He distinguishes between the anger we may feel against vice in our capacities as social actors and the calm detachment we should take as observers, further highlighting the way in which even if we take wrongdoers to task in the social realm, this may not be reflective of their (lack of) true responsibility (VM, 120). Most damning, he writes "once they are what they are, they cannot in the least behave otherwise than they do" (VM, 119).

Despite this, however, it is important to remember that Fichte never actually counsels giving up on these agents. Two pages later, he tells us that "there is no human being but only one humanity, no individual thinking and loving and hating, but only one thinking and loving and hating in and through each other" (VM, 121). It is true that we cannot make others free, and thus that we should not necessarily expect our "noble indignation" to succeed in rousing them to acknowledgment of their own freedom.

Fichte reminds us that we "cannot ascribe a lack of freedom to them without already presupposing that they are free to make themselves free,"

and that it is their “fault and disgrace” that they are in this situation (VM, 119). On Fichte’s view of the radical freedom of humanity, all it means to be within the grip of the mechanism of nature is that agents allow themselves to be, since all experience of limitation by the not-I is ultimately the result of their own free activity. Whatever an agent’s past, she can still determine herself anew through her actions.

Consequently, no human can be left behind in fulfilling our vocation. We can acknowledge that the temptation of thinking of oneself as unfree is strong, as it is easy, in the face of the calamities in the world, to believe that they are unavoidable and thus to despairingly allow oneself instead to drift along with natural causality. But this is precisely what we must not do.

While Fichte writes that he has fallen “into the midst of absolute incomprehensibility” (VM, 119), the clue to emerging from such incomprehensibility lies in what it takes for us to make ourselves free. We can escape incomprehensibility by focusing on action, and on the actions of others. Our initial awareness of our own freedom comes as a result of a summons to freedom by another free agent and relies on our upbringing as human beings (FNR, 29–39). As Fichte makes clear, from the *Lectures on the Scholar’s Vocation* through to the *Foundations of Natural Right*, we are only humans among other humans. Consequently, when we think of facing evil, we must not think of facing it alone. This encouragement can give us the strength to pull ourselves up from mechanistic despair.

This move—requiring the presence of other human beings in order to be a proper human being oneself—is characteristic of Fichte’s philosophy. But it also points to the way in which Fichte’s philosophy transforms the question of the problem of evil. It is not about any particular human being’s struggle with evil, but rather what we must all do together. Further, Fichte’s insistence on the importance of practical reason means that it does not matter so much whether we can wrap our minds around the general idea of agents who are free but nonetheless in the grip of blind mechanism, but on how we carry out our duties to the ones that we encounter, treating them—despite our indignation at their vice—as necessary participants in the vocation of all humanity, and thus perhaps tempering our anger with compassion.

It is human beings who are responsible for the state of the world. As long as we are actively taking up our vocation, we are actively creating the world in which evil is eradicated—this is a way of interpreting what Fichte means by saying the supersensible world is with us now. Together, the human species accomplishes the ordering of the world.

## The Scope of Human Responsibility

Of course, this sounds a little optimistic in the face of the very real uncertainties that surround us. The problem of evil has always emerged in the face of human sorrow over the evils we encounter, and any answer we give has to help us make sense of it. Looking at Fichte's account of the vocation of man as an answer to the problem of evil helps to point us to an interpretation of Fichte's text that can speak to us today, and clarifies the nature of responsibility by turning us away from pure theory and toward practice. Both kinds of evil traditionally described within the problem of evil are only to be resolved through our own actions, and both underscore our own responsibility for the world as a whole. This responsibility goes beyond anything we might individually have consented to or have had control over. The challenge that comes by accepting this connects us with the rest of our species; we can only grasp it by turning to how we can aid each other in our collective responsibility. Fichte shows us that in order to understand responsibility for evil we need to consider the role of the human community as a whole.

The problem of evil leads many to question God's existence, but at the root it is the question of how we make sense of the absurdity of the world. The choice often seems between facing it stoically or, at best, for theists, recognizing that at least God suffers with us, but Fichte gives us a mission. If Fichte is right, we must not despair, but rather summon added courage in the quest to fulfill our vocation as human beings.

## Jumping the Transcendental Shark

Fichte's "Argument of Belief" in Book III of  
*Die Bestimmung des Menschen* and the  
 Transition from the Earlier to the  
 Later *Wissenschaftslehre*

DANIEL BREAZEALE

Assessing the "Vocation of Humanity," 1794–1800

Let us begin our reconsideration of the place of *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* within the larger framework of Fichte's development and its relationship to his earlier "scientific" presentations of his philosophy somewhat obliquely: namely, by means of a brief comparison of this popular work of 1800, not to any of the scientific treatises or private lectures from the Jena period, but instead to another, earlier set of thoroughly "popular" lectures and writings—namely, the ones Fichte produced immediately *prior to or simultaneous with* his first efforts to present the foundations of his new philosophy. Here, I am referring, first of all, to *Über die Würde des Menschen*, the printed address with which he concluded his private Zurich lectures in February 1794, and, secondly, to the series of popular lectures he delivered during his first semester in Jena under the collective title *Von den Pflichten der Gelehrten*, the first five of which were published in the summer of 1794 under the title *Einige Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Gelehrten*, and of

these I will be focusing particularly upon the very first one, significantly entitled *Über die Bestimmung des Menschen als solchen*.<sup>1</sup> In doing this, my strategy will be to compare what is said about “the vocation of man” in Fichte’s popular writings at the beginning of the Jena period with what he had to say on the same topic at the very end of the same period, in order to determine if this suggests any major *changes* in his philosophical doctrines and in his conception of what philosophy can and cannot demonstrate and how it should go about doing this.

### Philosophy as *Denkart*

As Günter Zöller has pointed out,<sup>2</sup> one important goal of Fichte’s popular writings is to describe the *Denkart* or “way of thinking” that he associated with his philosophy and believed could and would be produced in anyone who had mastered the same—though at the same time he insisted that one must never confuse scientific philosophy per se (which occupies the theoretical standpoint of “speculation”) with the *Denkart* in question (which occupies the practical standpoint of “life”). This “philosophical” *Denkart* is described in very similar terms in 1794 and 1800: namely, as a rather stoic elevation of the soul above earthly disappointments and failures, accompanied by a firm resolve to do one’s duty no matter what, undismayed by hardships and fears, including the fear of death, and accompanied by

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1. The Zurich lecture, *Über die Würde des Menschen* [henceforth, WM], may be found in GA, I/2, 83–89 and SW, I, 412–16. An English translation, “Concerning Human Dignity,” is in *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings*, ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988) [henceforth, EPW], 83–86. For the first five Jena lectures, *Einige Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung des Menschen* [henceforth, VBM] see GA, I/3, 25–68 and SW, VI, 291–346; English trans., “Some Lectures Concerning the Scholar’s Vocation,” in EPW, 144–84. The other surviving and unpublished lectures from the *Pflichten der Gelehrten* series of the summer semester of 1794 were first edited by Siegfried Berger and published in 1924 (Leipzig: Meiner) under the title *Über den Unterschied des Geistes und des Buchstabens in der Philosophie* [henceforth, UGB] and may now be found in GA, II/3, 315–42; English trans. “Concerning the Difference between the Spirit and the Letter within Philosophy,” EPW, 192–215. All of these texts are readily available in a single volume in Fichte, *Von den Pflichten der Gelehrten. Jenaer Vorlesungen 1794/95*, ed. Reinhard Lauth, Hans Jacob, and Peter Schneider (Hamburg: Meiner, 1971), with an informative introduction by Lauth.

2. Günter Zöller, “‘Das Element aller Gewissheit.’ Jacobi, Kant, und Fichte über den Glauben,” *Fichte-Studien* 14 (1998): 21–41.

a firm, indeed joyous, confidence in the ultimate triumph of morality, the final victory of spirit over nature.<sup>3</sup>

Insofar as they are concerned simply with promulgating such a way of thinking, all of these popular writings might well be considered purely “edifying,” in the Kierkegaardian sense, and to that extent to be insulated from philosophical analysis and criticism. But they are by no means limited to this “edifying” function. It is important to recall that in both his early and later popular works Fichte explicitly claimed to be providing his listeners and readers with a “popular” (that is, not philosophically or “scientifically” grounded) exposition of certain conclusions and doctrines that could (and indeed had to be) independently arrived at and demonstrated within the *Wissenschaftslehre* proper.<sup>4</sup> And this is how I now propose to

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3. “An intuition of the sort just discussed [that is, a philosophical intuition of the pure I] has the most far-reaching consequences for a person’s practical attitude, and it has these consequences precisely because of the consequences it has for one’s theoretical thinking.” “Philosophy consists in just this attitude . . . : that firmness of spirit and unshakeable elevation of the soul, that calm disdain for the material world and self-contained inner life that philosophy can provide.” “For such a person death is nothing more than the end of a particular series of appearances. He does not know what will come after the end of this series, and that is the least of his worries. What he does know is that *he* will exist. It is impossible for him to think that he will not exist, for the I is that from which he cannot abstract. To try to think of oneself as nonexistence is pure nonsense” (UGB, GA, II/3, 332–33, EPW, 206–207). See too the following passage from Fichte’s August 16, 1800 letter to Friedrich Schlegel, in which, immediately after accusing Schlegel of confusing the standpoints of life and philosophy, and hence confusing the “*philosophischen Denkart*, die allerding in das Leben übergehen muß, und der Philosophie, im objective Sinne, der Philosophie, als einer Wissenschaft,” Fichte adds: “Die wissenschaftliche idealistische Standpunkt kann nie in das Leben einfließen; er ist durchaus natürlich. Die Denkart, die eine durchgeführte Philosophie für das Leben erzeuge, glaube ich im 3ten Buche der Bestimmung des Menschen dargestellt zu haben” (GA, III/4, 283).

4. At the beginning of WM Fichte declares that the purpose of this lecture is “to cast a brief glance” over the scientific system of the human mind that he had erected in the preceding lectures (WM, GA, I/2, 86; SW, I, 412; EPW, 83). In the first of the *Vorlesungen über die Bestimmung der Gelehrten* he asserts that only a “well grounded and exhaustive philosophy” can provide us with genuine insight into the vocation of man as such, and thus that in these popular writings he will have to present merely the results of such a systematic investigation of the mind without deducing them properly, but will instead base his presentation upon the feelings of his listeners (UGB, Lect. 1, GA, I/3, 28; SW, VI, 294; EPW, 147). In the Preface to BM he declares that professional philosophers will find “nothing in this book that has not already been presented in other writings by the same author” and that the task of this new book is simply “to provide an account of whatever is contained in recent philosophy that may be useful outside the recent schools and to present this in that order in which it must be developed by artless reflection” (BM, GA, I/6, 189; SW, II, 167; VM, 1).

treat these texts: as communicating what one might call the “spirit of the *Wissenschaftslehre*,” in order to identify any significant alterations in the same spirit between 1794 and 1800.

### The Subject (What Is Man?)

As their very titles indicate, all of these popular writings are concerned with the same basic question: What is the distinctive character of *human beings*? What is the source of their distinctive *value* or *dignity*? What is their *Bestimmung*—a polyseminal German term that means (among other things) “determination,” “distinctive character,” “final end or goal,” “task,” and “calling or vocation”? The close connection between philosophy as such and the question “What is human?” was, of course, explicitly noted by Kant in his lectures on logic, where he famously noted that the three questions that any philosophy must answer—What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope?—could all be reduced to the single question, “What is a human being?”<sup>5</sup> And one might conjecture that it is at least in part for this reason that Fichte chose this same question as the appropriate vehicle for his popular presentations of the content of his new philosophy.

Writing in 1794, Fichte asserts over and over again that the only proper *topic* or *subject* of philosophical inquiry is man himself, understood not as a “pure I” (though this may indeed be relevant to our subject), but rather as a finite intellect and embodied practical agent.<sup>6</sup> And he further claims that philosophy’s only *means* for answering its questions regarding the nature and limits of knowledge, duty, and hope (or belief) is by turning its

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5. Kant, *Logik*, *Kants Gesammelte Schriften* (Berlin: Reimer/DeGruyter, 1900ff.), vol. IX, 25. Alexis Philonenko has called particular attention to the close way in which the structure of BM “reprises the entire Kantian thematic” leading from the question of knowledge to that of duty to that of hope, and he suggests that one reason that Book III has been so widely misunderstood is because readers have failed to appreciate the *dynamic* manner in which Fichte connects these three Kantian questions to one another in such a way that the question of knowledge leads to the question of duty, which in turn leads to the question of hope (*L'oeuvre de Fichte I* [Paris: Vrin, 1984], 89).

6. All philosophy is concerned with nothing other than the following question: What is the vocation of man as such and his surest means for fulfilling the same? (see VBG, Lect. I, GA, I/3, 27; SW, VI, 294; EWP, 146), and it is therefore the first task of any philosophy to answer this question (see VBG, Lect. I, GA, I/3, 28; SW, VI, 294; EPW, 147). But, as Fichte goes on to explain, in order to be an I at all, one must not only possess that character of “absolute being” associated with the concept of pure I-hood; one must also be something *specific*. “It is not simply that *he is*; *he also is something*. He does not say simply ‘I am’; he adds ‘I am this or that’” (VBG, Lect. I, GA, I/3, 29; SW, VI, 296, EPW, 148).

attention *within*, by means of *reflection* upon the human mind, “considered in all its affairs, activities, and modes of acting.”<sup>7</sup> Hence, philosophy itself is *nothing but* “the systematic history of the human mind’s universal modes of acting.”<sup>8</sup> And thus the only way to grasp the *vocation* of man is by carefully attending to what actually occurs within human consciousness. There is no need and indeed no possibility of understanding our *Bestimmung* with reference to anything beyond ourselves.

Though *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* is still preoccupied with this same question—What is a human being?—and though Fichte still insists that the way to answer this question is by examining oneself, by *reflecting* upon one’s own knowledge and belief and the presuppositions of the same,<sup>9</sup> it is no longer clear that he thinks that the proper objects of philosophy must be *limited* to the acts of the human mind. On the contrary, especially when we consider the contents of Book III, it would appear that what is now considered to be the proper domain of legitimate philosophical inquiry has *expanded* considerably since 1794, inasmuch as it now embraces the entire supersensible world, understood as existing on its own, apart from the finite human mind, as well as the independently existing author of the same: “the One, *which exists* . . . the original source [*Urquelle*] of both you and me.”<sup>10</sup> Hence, in 1800 but not in 1794 the question “What is

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7. “Philosophy teaches us to seek everything within the I” (WM, EPW, 83; GA, I/2, 87; SW, I, 413). “The material of all philosophy is itself the human mind or spirit, considered in all its affairs, activities, and modes of acting. Only after it has made an exhaustive inventory of all of these modes of acting is philosophy *Wissenschaftslehre*. The philosopher observes the way in which the human mind works. He freezes this process, holding still for examination that which is changeable and transient within the mind. He grasps the way in which the mind works” (UGB, EPW, 200; GA, II/3, 325). “The new series of things into which we are supposed to be introduced [by philosophy] is the series constituted by the acts of the human mind itself, and no longer the series constituted by the objects of these actions” (UGB, EPW, 203; GA, II/3, 328).

8. UGB, 208; GA, II/3, 334; EPW, 208.

9. Accordingly, Book I begins with a declaration that the I is an “object of reflection” and a resolve by the investigating I to determine its vocation “by engaging in reflection,” just as others who have investigated this topic have done (BM, Bk. I, §§ 5 and 7; GA, I/6, 192; SW, II, 171; VM, 4). Book II begins with a summons by the “Spirit” to the I to look more closely within itself in order to observe what one really is conscious of when one is conscious of objects: “What I am supposed to think, I have to think for myself” (BM, Bk. II, § 4; GA, I/6, 215; SW, II, 199; VM, 27). And Book III also begins with a new resolve on the part of the I to put aside the despair into which it was thrown at the end of Book II and “collect myself for a moment and pay attention to myself” in order to determine what I hear “deep within my soul” (BM, Bk. III, § 5; GA, I/6, 253; SW, II, 248; VM, 68).

10. BM, Bk. III, § 82; GA, I/6, 293; SW, II, 299; VM, 107.



man?" seems to require an explicit relation of the I to something *other than man himself*, something that appears to lie altogether outside the domain constituted by the "acts of the human mind," something which no longer can be treated as an "I" at all, not even a "pure" one. And perhaps this is precisely what one should have expected, inasmuch as Fichte explicitly understood Book III as an *extension* of his system into the philosophy of religion.<sup>11</sup> Yet, as we well shall see, this very extension raises profound issues concerning the character and limits of transcendental philosophy as such.

### The End or Goal [*Zweck*] of Human Striving

In 1794 the "vocation of man" is described in strictly *ethical* terms. Our final goal is to subordinate one aspect of ourselves, the one associated with our empirical desires and with our finitude in general, to another aspect of ourselves, associated with our pure drive for independence: to subordinate, if you will, the empirical to the pure I. Hence, the portrait of the human condition provided in these early popular writings is one of a profoundly "divided self," a finite, sensible creature limited by factors beyond its control and at the same time an "absolute" being possessed of pure practical reason and thus capable of purely autonomous self-activity.<sup>12</sup> The very *concept* of a human being thus harbors within itself a real *tension*, if not an outright *contradiction*: on the one hand, reason must never allow itself to be cancelled by sensibility; but on the other, without finite limits a human being is not an "I" at all. (And thus, as Fichte makes abundantly clear time and time again in his Jena writings, the only *real I* is the finite, embodied one.) The only way to "resolve" this contradiction is to recognize that the distinctive task or vocation or "final end" of such an "ontological centaur" (the phrase is Ortega y Gasset's) is to strive constantly and endlessly to overcome its self-division by means of concrete action in the world. In this way it comes *ever closer* to achieving its ultimate end of subordinating its lower, sensible character to its absolute or purely self-determined character,

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11. "While working on my current book [BM], I have obtained a deeper insight [*Blick*] into religion than ever before." Fichte to Johanna Fichte, November 5, 1799 (GA, III/4, 142).

12. "Just as certainly as man is rational, he is his own end; that is, he does not exist because something else should exist, but instead, he exists simply because *he* should exist. His mere existence is the ultimate purpose of his existence, or (which amounts to the same thing) it is contradictory to inquire into the purpose of man's existence: he is *because* he is. This quality of absolute being, of being for his own sake, is the characteristic feature, the determination or the vocation [*Bestimmung*] of man, considered merely and simply as a rational being" (VBG, Lect. I, GA I/3, 29; SW, VI, 295–96; EPW, 148).

to that “pure I,” which is the same for everyone.<sup>13</sup> This is why the word *Bestimmung* is so apt for Fichte’s purposes: what defines a human being is ultimately not his *nature* but his *task*: he is the kind of being who “ought to be what he is simply because he is.”<sup>14</sup>

There are two things to note about Fichte’s understanding of this final end in 1794: first of all, it refers us exclusively to the *sensible* world, which is here described as the *only* field of human efficacy;<sup>15</sup> and secondly, it can never, even in principle, be accomplished or realized, since, if it were, this would destroy the finitude essential to any actual I. To be sure, the lecture on human dignity concludes with a stirring reminder that the final goal of all our striving is to overcome individuality itself (and, presumably, with this, nature as well) and to establish that “great unity of spirit” within which all individuals are comprised. But this, as Fichte reminds us in a note to this passage, is to be understood as no more than a *regulative ideal* in the Kantian sense, since “the unity of pure spirit is for me an *unreachable ideal*, an ultimate goal, which, however, will never be actual.”<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, as we slowly make our way along the infinite path toward our ultimate end, the concrete task facing us is always the same: to transform nature and society by hard work in this, the only world, rejoicing all the while at the sheer immensity of our project!<sup>17</sup> Endless as it may be, however, ours remains a thoroughly *this-worldly* task.

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13. “Man’s ultimate and supreme end is complete harmony with himself and—so that he can be in harmony with himself—the harmony of all external things with his own necessary, practical concepts of them (i.e., with those concepts that determine how things ought to be)” (VBG, Lect. I, GA, I/3, 31; SW, VI, 299; EPW, 150).

14. VBG, Lect. I, 148, GA, I/3, 29; SW, VI, 296; EPW, 148.

15. Considered simply as a “human being as such,” man’s ultimate task is to work to transform the natural world (including his own body) in conformity with the dictates of the moral law; that is, “to subordinate to himself all that is irrational,” making it more compatible with his demand for absolute independence from external influences. (See VBG, Lect. I, GA, I/3, 32; SW, VI, 300; EPW, 152). We are also necessarily members of human society, and our concrete social task—that is, our vocation within society—is to work tirelessly toward greater and greater social equality and unification. (See VBG, Lect. II, GA, I/3, 40; SW, VI, 310; EPW, 160.) In both cases, however, Fichte explicitly notes that we can never *actually* achieve the perfection at which we necessarily aim and for which we must necessarily strive, “so long as we are not supposed to cease to be man and to become God” (VBG, Lect. I; GA, I/3, 32; SW, VI, 300; EPW, 152 and Lect. II, GA, I/3, 40; SW, VI, 310; EPW, 159–60).

16. WM, GA, I/2, 80; SW, VI, 416; EPW, 86.

17. “Let us rejoice over the prospect of the immense field that is ours to cultivate! Let us rejoice because we feel our own strength and because the task is endless!” (VBB, Lect. V, GA, I/3, 68; SW, VI, 346; EPW, 184).

This picture of the human condition recurs in *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, which is replete with passages describing that infinite striving that is our lot in the empirical world, though now it is modified somewhat, first by the claim that we must believe that our ultimate goal of perfecting nature and society will actually and necessarily be *achieved* in this sensible world at some distant point in human history,<sup>18</sup> and secondly, by the truly “baroque hypothesis” that in order to preserve the infinitude of our striving in the sensible world we must also believe in an apparently endless series of future sensible lives and worlds.<sup>19</sup>

More significantly, however, what was in 1794 an intimate portrait of man’s “divided soul” has been transformed by 1800 into a much larger-scale landscape depicting a division within *reality* itself, a division between the “sensible” and “supersensible” realms, each governed by its own distinctive laws, to which the striving I must devoutly entrust the achievement of its ends, quite independently of its own willing. There is nothing comparable to this in the earlier writings, and indeed it is easy to see why, inasmuch as we now appear to have ventured well beyond any description or deduction of the necessary actions of the human mind.

Thanks to this new ontological *Anschluß*, Fichte is now able to supplement his former account of our endless striving in the sensible world with a new and very different account of our efficacy in the supersensible one, a “higher world” in which—thanks to the distinctive law of the same (the law of “causality through mere willing”)—the dutiful willing of the finite I always does make a real difference, even if it should fail to accomplish any of its ends in the sensible world.<sup>20</sup> To be sure, Fichte continues to insist in Book III that my willing must always still be related to some concrete act in the sensible world, since this is the only way in which one’s “true final end, that is, obedience to the law” can present itself to any finite I. But the introduction into the mix of the concept of efficacy in the supersensible world nevertheless produces a major *shift in emphasis* in Fichte’s new account of the vocation of humanity; for now it has become clear for the first time that though I must act and strive endlessly in the sensible world, I do this *not for the sake of any concrete ends*, including the

18. See BM, Bk. III, § 44; GA, I/6, 267–69; VM, 82–83 and § 53; GA, I/6, 276; VM, 90–91.

19. See BM, Bk. III, §§ 64–69; GA, I/6, 282–85; VM, 96–100. The apt description of this as a “baroque hypothesis” comes from Ives Radrizzani (“The Place of the *Vocation of Man* in Fichte’s Work,” 333).

20. See BM, Bk. III, §§ 57–60; GA, I/6, 278–79; VM, 92–93.

perfection of the natural and social worlds, *but only for the sake of that other, supersensible world.*<sup>21</sup>

### The Pure I and/or the Infinite Will

Writing in 1794, Fichte declares the question concerning “what the genuinely spiritual element in man, the pure I, might be like, considered simply in itself, isolated and apart from relation to anything outside itself?” to be not simply *unanswerable* in fact but *unanswerable in principle*, inasmuch as “the I can never be conscious of itself, except as something empirically determined.”<sup>22</sup> Strictly speaking, therefore, such a “pure I” is simply “inconceivable,” and it can therefore be represented only *negatively*.<sup>23</sup> To be sure, we do possess a concept of such a “pure I,” but we must be careful to recognize the deficiencies of the same, for an I that is not “for itself” is not really an I at all, and—as all of Fichte’s scientific presentations of his philosophy during the Jena period insist—only a limited I can posit itself for itself and be conscious of its own efficacy. Hence, the concept of the “pure I” refers to nothing *real*, but simply to that *abstract structure* of I-hood as such—to that which is “genuinely spiritual in man,” as Fichte puts it, and is therefore common to all finite I’s. Here, we find no suggestion that this pure I has any reality in itself, apart from the community of finite I’s.

In 1800, Fichte still pays lip service to the “incomprehensibility” or “great mystery” of the pure I,<sup>24</sup> now re-baptized, or rather, reconceived as “the One, eternal infinite will” (since the true origin or root of the I has by now been discovered to lie entirely in practical reason, that is, in willing). But he then goes on to characterize this infinite will *positively* as “self-active reason,” as “a will that is in itself a law,” and as a will that is

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21. “According to my most authentic being and most proximate purpose, therefore, I am already living and acting efficaciously here [in the sensible world] only for the sake of the other [supersensible] world; and I am entirely certain only of my efficacy in the latter. I act efficaciously in the sensible world only for the sake of the other world, because I cannot act efficaciously in this other world without at least *wanting* to do so in this world” (BM, Bk. III, § 83; GA, I/6, 282; SW, II, 285; VM, 97).

22. VBG, Lect. I, GA I/3, 28; SW, VI, 295; EPW, 147.

23. See VBG, Lect. I, GA I/3, 28; SW, VI, 295; EPW, 147. Since the characteristic feature of the not-I is *multiplicity*, we must represent the pure or absolute I as an *absolute unity* (see VBG, Lect I, GA, I/3, 29; SW, VI, 296; EWP, 148).

24. See BM, Bk. III, § 83; GA, I/6, 293; SW, II, 299–300; VM, 108; BM, Bk. III, § 87; GA, I/6, 296; SW, II, 304; VM, 111; and BM, Bk. III, § 89; GA, I/6, 297; SW, II, 308; VM, 112.

“determined eternally and inalterably, a will on which one can surely and unfailingly count,” as “a will in which the lawful will of finite beings has consequences without fail,” and as “the one, *that exists* [*de(r) Eine()*, *das da ist*],” whereas everything else is merely “semblance and appearance.”<sup>25</sup>

With this new doctrine of the infinite will, Fichte thought that he could finally answer the question with which Book III began, a question that could not even be asked, let alone answered, in 1794: namely, the question concerning the *origin* of the voice of conscience. It does not come from us as finite I’s, though we remain free to heed it or not; it is nothing more nor less than the voice of God within us. It is “the oracle from the eternal world, made sensible through my surroundings and translated by my understanding [*Vernehmen*] into my language”; it is “the ray of light on which we come forth from the infinite and are established as individuals and particular beings; it draws the limits of our personality; it is therefore our true original component, the ground and the stuff of all the life we live”; in short, it is not only the “mediator” between you and me, it is our “original source” or *Urquell*.<sup>26</sup>

This infinite will is not only that determinate will that is the ultimate source of the voice of conscience within us (and hence the source as well of the entire supersensible or spiritual world of finite wills, the author of each person’s finite capacity for freedom, which, according to Fichte, must be seen as the “product of this infinite will”);<sup>27</sup> it is also the source of the sensible world, inasmuch as it is the ground of those original limits that define the concrete finitude of each individual I, as well as what harmonizes my original limits (that is, my manifold of feeling) with yours, so that we experience the same sensible world—a fact explicable in no other way.<sup>28</sup> Not only does this One eternal will harmonize the original limitations of all finite I’s, it is also responsible for those universally shared laws of intuition and thinking by virtue of which we each posit for ourselves the same objective, empirical world of things in space and time. For all of these reasons, it richly deserves to be called the “creator of the world.” To be sure, Fichte adds, this can mean only “the creator of the world *in finite*

25. BM, Bk. III, § 85; GA, I/6, 295; SW, II, 302; VM, 110; BM, Bk. III, § 79; GA, I/291; SW, II, 397; VM, 106; BM, Bk. III, § 80; GA, I/6, 292; SW, II, 297–98; VM, 106; and BM, Bk. III, § 81; GA, I/6, 293; SW, II, 298; VM, 106–107.

26. BM, Bk. III, § 82–83; GA, I/6, 292–93; SW, II, 298–300; VM, 107–108.

27. BM, Bk. III, § 81; GA, I/6, 293; SW, II, 298; VM, 107.

28. BM, Bk. III, §§ 84–85; GA, I/6, 295–96; VM, 109–10. This is of course a very “Leibnizian” doctrine.

reason.”<sup>29</sup> But this nod to transcendental idealism cannot disguise the fact that we now seem to have made a thoroughly *transcendent* move beyond finite reason and its world of experience to the external *ground or substrate* of the same—a move from what exists “for itself,” even if only “through” something else, to what exists truly “in itself,” from the I to the absolute, from the human being to God.<sup>30</sup>

However one might propose to interpret this new doctrine of the infinite will—as introducing into the *Wissenschaftslehre* a new ontological dualism of the sensible and supersensible worlds, as a move toward a more Platonic (or perhaps neo-Platonic) variety of idealism, in which the absolute becomes the “substrate”<sup>31</sup> of those “appearances” encountered in

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29. “The eternal will is thus surely the creator of the world, in the only way in which it can be and in the only way in which creation is required: namely, *within finite reason*. . . . Only reason is; infinite reason in itself, and finite reason in it and through it. Only in our minds does it create a world, or at least that *from* which and *through* which we develop it: the call to duty; and concordant [*übereinstimmende*] feelings, intuition, and laws of thought” (BM, Bk. III, § 86; GA, I/6, 296; SW, II, 303; VM, 110).

30. Despite Fichte’s claim to have extended his philosophy into the realm of philosophy of religion in Book III, the term *God* appears only once in this entire work (BM, Bk. III, § 89; GA, I/6, 297; SW, II, 308; VM, 112), and Fichte is careful to note that we can ascribe neither consciousness nor personality to this “God,” inasmuch as we are able to conceive only of a *discursive* consciousness and a *limited* personality. See too BM, Bk. III, § 98, GA I/6, 301; SW, II, 309; VM, 116, where the infinite will is referred to as “the father of spirits.”

31. Though the term *substrate* does not appear in BM, it is used frequently in *WLnm* to describe the relation of the pure will to the sensible and supersensible worlds. As several commentators, including Radrizzani, have pointed out, this raises difficult hermeneutic problems for the student of the later Jena *Wissenschaftslehre* (and of BM, insofar as one agrees that it is basically no more than a popular presentation of conclusions deduced in *WLnm*). Specifically, there appears to be a real tension between viewing the eternal absolute (pure will, pure I, infinite will) as, on the one hand, what is truly real and hence as the ontological substrate of all other reality, and, on the other hand, viewing it as an element of a “five-fold synthesis” in which each of the terms is reciprocally related to and conditioned by all of the others, so that none is more fundamental than any other, which would, for example mean, that one could just as easily say that the finite empirical I is a condition necessary for the possibility of the pure I, and hence call it the “substrate” of the same.

After noting that Fichte’s use of the term *substrate* in the *nova methodo* at least appears to mark a turn from epistemology to ontology in this work and that the very idea of such a substrate seems to be “heterogenous to the structure of the *nova methodo*” (“The Place of the *Vocation of Man* in Fichte’s Work,” 328), Radrizzani corrects such an appearance on the grounds that “the structure of the fivefold synthesis [is] incompatible with the idea that one of the terms of this synthesis functions as the substrate of another term of the same synthesis?” (328). Yet this conflict will not go away, as is shown by the even stronger appearance of an “ontological difference” between the I and the infinite will in Book III of BM. For a penetrating discussion of some of these issues, see Peter Rohs, “Über die Zeit als das Mittelglied zwischen dem Intelligiblen und dem Sinnlichen,” *Fichte-Studien* 6 (1994): 95–116.

the physical and spiritual worlds, including the finite I itself, or as a move toward a sort of “inverted Spinozism,”<sup>32</sup> which is what may seem to be suggested by the ecstatic vision of the living unity of nature and spirit, *hen kai pan*, with which Book III concludes—whichever of these options one might select, the dominant “spirit” of this new way of looking at the vocation of man would still seem to be vastly different from that of the early *Wissenschaftslehre*, understood as a *Strebungsphilosophie* (that is, “philosophy of striving”) oriented entirely toward practical action in the sensible world and confessing its own inability to transcend the limits of human consciousness.

So much for the comparison between the popular writings of 1794 and 1800. The question now is, What does this imply concerning the relationship of *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* to the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*? Rather than interpreting *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* as signaling any kind of radical new direction in Fichte’s philosophy or reading it as evidence of a critical *Wendung* or “about-face” in the internal development of the same, I view this popular work primarily as a highly visible public *marker* of the distance Fichte had *already* traveled between 1794 and 1800. Though the path in question was long and sometimes tortuous, it was nevertheless a *continuous* one, along which Fichte was propelled mainly by the internal logic of his own constantly evolving system and by a fearless determination to, like Socrates, “follow the winds of the argument” wherever they might lead him.

In terms of the internal development of Fichte’s philosophy, the step from the *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* to the *Grundlage des Naturrechts* is a large and important one, as is that to the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* and then on to *Das System der Sittenlehre*. In comparison to the length of some of these steps, the one to *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* is relatively short, only to be followed by a series of ever lengthening strides in 1801, 1804, and the years that followed. In each of these cases, however, a reader thoroughly acquainted with the immediately preceding presentations of the *Wissenschaftslehre* can appreciate how each new and apparently revolutionary step both solidifies results that were previously established while proposing new solutions to problems implicit in but not

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32. “An inverted Spinozism” is how Jacobi described the *Wissenschaftslehre* in his “Open Letter” to Fichte (see GA, III/3, 227). At the conclusion of Book III (BM, Bk. III, §§ 111–18; GA, I/6, 306–309; SW, II, 316–19; VM, 121–23) Fichte proclaims that once one’s heart is no longer attached to earthly things, then the universe itself will not appear to be the place where the eternal stream of life surges and rushes, where everything—including the finite I and the infinite will—is related to everything else and where, no matter where one may look, one will see nothing but the life of the one eternal will in everything: in one’s own body, in plants and animals, and in human beings, who now reveal themselves to be united with the infinite will in one great “kinship of spirits.” Viewed in this way, says Fichte, “there is no killing principle in nature, for nature is throughout nothing but life.”

resolved by those earlier presentation. In other words, I understand the “development” of the *Wissenschaftslehre* as a thoroughly *dialectical* process.

Fichte’s own claims to the contrary notwithstanding, the “doctrine” professed in the later versions of his system is by no means identical in content or spirit to that professed in the earlier versions of the same, differing merely in purely “formal” matters of manner of presentation and technical vocabulary. On the contrary, there were many real and important changes, some of them quite momentous, along Fichte’s philosophical path, but almost all of them occurred incrementally and gradually. The peculiar rhetorical strategy and distinctive religious “tone” of *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* undoubtedly owes a great deal to the circumstances of the *Atheismusstreit* and to the public criticisms of the *Wissenschaftslehre* by Jacobi and others; but the *problematic philosophical content* of the same—above all, the doctrine of the “infinite will” as the substrate and creator of a plurality of finite I’s and hence of their sensible and supersensible worlds is already explicitly anticipated in the second half of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*, where this doctrine is introduced in order to solve a problem raised by the genetic account of the conditions for the possibility of consciousness in the first half of that work. That account demonstrates that consciousness is possible only if it contains at its root something that is neither a cognition nor a volition, but combines features of both. And this is precisely what we find in the original feeling of “ought,” which, in turn, must be understood as an expression, within finite consciousness, of that “pure will” that is the central element of the fivefold synthetic period articulated in the final portions of the *nova methodo*.<sup>33</sup>

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33. Very briefly to summarize Fichte’s complex transcendental argument for this conclusion: an analysis of the concept of the I reveals that any efficacy on its part, that is, any application of its practical power, presupposes some concept of a goal of acting, and hence a prior application of its theoretical power (thinking). However, it has previously been established in the *WLn* that no application of the I’s theoretical power (no cognition, including any cognition of a goal) is possible apart from an exercise of its practical power, since every cognition must begin with a feeling of limitation, which can arise only when some original activity or drive of the I—and hence some application of its practical power—is thwarted or checked.

Thus, says Fichte, we have arrived at an impasse: no acting without feeling, no feeling without acting; no concept of a goal, no practical activity; no practical activity, no concept of a goal. It is precisely in order to avoid this impasse that we must posit—if, that is, we are to complete our transcendental account of the conditions necessary for the very possibility of any consciousness whatsoever—the presence to or within consciousness of something that it has *not* freely posited, something given to it, which combines the features of both theoretical and practical activity, something that is, as Fichte puts it, “simultaneously an object of cognition and is efficacious.” What is required by our synthetic derivation of the conditions for the possibility of consciousness is something within the I itself that successfully combines both feeling and acting, limitation and freedom: “a kind of freedom that would



The way this doctrine is subsequently deployed and articulated in Book III also makes something clear that was perhaps not yet clear to Fichte himself at the time he was composing his *Sittenlehre* and his lectures on *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo*: namely, the extreme difficulty, if not the impossibility, of successfully explicating the relationship between the finite I and the pure will or absolute—and thus, of actually deducing “the highest synthesis within the spiritual world”—within the still recognizably Kantian framework of his earlier transcendental system, and, in particular, the difficulty of doing this in a manner that would not undermine the autonomy of the finite I.<sup>34</sup> Such a realization may well have made him even more aware of the need to expand his previous method of “construction in intuition” or indeed to find a new, albeit still “genetic” method of philosophizing that could more successfully handle these new problems, even if that meant a major extension of the proper domain of transcendental inquiry.

To say, however, that the path of Fichte’s philosophical development was a continuous one, constantly driven by its own internal, dialectical logic, is certainly not to claim that it was a *necessary* one nor to deny that *other* developmental paths might have been—and perhaps still may be—possible, starting with the germ planted in Zurich in the winter of 1793–94. Nor is it to claim that the particular new solutions to old problems that were actually embraced by Fichte and which explain the gradual evolution of his philosophy from one shape and standpoint to the next are the *only possible* ones. And this, I submit, is one of the keys for understanding the relevance of Fichte’s thought for contemporary philosophy: perhaps what it

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not be freedom unless it were limited and a kind of limitation that would not be limited unless it were free” (FTP, 286).

What this means is that the freedom (in Fichte’s terminology, the “determinability”) of the I must be understood as *limited in a certain manner from the start*, and limited in such a way that “pure” or “formal” freedom can *express* itself practically as material freedom (i.e., as the actual freedom of an individual). But according to Fichte, “[T]hese features are united in only one thing: in *pure will*, which must [therefore] be presupposed prior to all empirical willing and prior to all empirical cognition. This pure will is something purely intelligible, but it can express itself only through a feeling of ‘ought,’ and in this way it becomes an object of thought” (FTP, 307).

34. On this point, see the account of “the predestination of all free actions through reason for eternity” in *Das System der Sittenlehre* (GA, I/5, 207; SW, V, 227–28; SE, 216–17). But Fichte himself was so dissatisfied with this account that he explicitly rejected it—without, however, providing any alternative solution to the same problem—in his September 18, 1800, letter to Reinhold (GA, III/3, 314). One may interpret this as evidence of his growing dissatisfaction with the entire transcendental framework of the later Jena *Wissenschaftslehre* and growing awareness of the need to construct a new one.

has to say to us today can better be discovered by following one or another of the roads first opened up but never actually traveled by Fichte himself rather than by following the particular path that he did take.<sup>35</sup>

### The Defective “Argument of Belief” in Bk. III of the *Vocation of Man*

Allow me to conclude with a brief comment about the deeply problematic character of the distinctive “argument of belief”<sup>36</sup> employed in Book III. First of all, let us consider the basic strategy of this argument, which is succinctly summarized by Fichte himself as follows:

the argument of Book III begins when I reflect upon or observe that I am “in fact” directly aware of an “inner voice” that directs me to act freely in a certain way: namely, in the way demanded by my concrete moral obligations. Echoing Kant, Fichte maintains

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35. Why, for example, could one not simply stop—as Fichte in his earlier writings sometimes appears to recommend—with a frank *acknowledgment of the limits of transcendental explanation* and hence of philosophy? Why not just recognize the necessity for the possibility of consciousness of certain “incomprehensible limits” upon the otherwise freely self-positing subject—namely, the manifold of “feeling” revealed by the original *Anstoß* or “check” on the I’s striving (the origin of the sensible world for the I); the *Aufforderung* or “summons” for the I to freely limit its own action out of recognition of the freedom of other finite I’s (the origin of the juridical world of mutually interacting free beings); and the feeling of being categorically obliged to determine one’s will in a certain specific manner in a particular concrete context (the origin of moral obligation, as well as of one’s belief in one’s own reality and that of others, as well as ultimate ground of belief in the reality of the world itself)? *Would it not be better simply to leave it at that, on the grounds that to propose any philosophical account of the “origin” of these limitations, as Fichte does in the nova methodo and Die Bestimmung des Menschen, is to transcend the boundaries of consciousness and hence to violate the strict limits previously placed upon what can—and cannot—be accomplished by transcendental philosophy?*

36. The phrase “argument of belief” comes from Ives Radrizzani, who introduces it in order to defend Fichte from the criticism that he is guilty in Book III of treating what is, properly speaking, only an *explanatory ground* of consciousness as a *real being*, and thus of illicitly “ontologizing” his account of the supersensible world and the function therein of “pure willing.” Radrizzani excuses Fichte’s description of the infinite will as the external ground or substrate of the finite I in BM on the grounds that this “is simply part of the argument of belief and not of knowledge.” He further maintains that the practical ontology of Book III nevertheless “remains perfectly transcendental and that God can only be said to be the transsubjective basis of the human community as a transcendental idea of practical reason” (Radrizzani, “The Place of the *Vocation of Man* in Fichte’s Work,” 336).

that it is simply a “fact [*Tatsache*] of my inner being” (i.e., a “fact of reason”) that I hear such a voice demanding that I will lawfully, simply for the sake of doing so. The discussion of *Glaube* thus begins *not* with a profession of faith, but with a claim to possess immediate knowledge (*Wissen*):<sup>37</sup> namely, *the knowledge that there is more to me and to life than knowing*; namely, *acting*. And this is something that I “know immediately.”<sup>38</sup>

“The second step in my thinking,” Fichte then notes, is the assertion “that this demand is in accord with reason [*vernunftmäßig*] and is the source and guideline of everything else that is in accord with reason, that it takes its direction from nothing else, but that everything else ought to take its direction from this demand and depend upon it.”<sup>39</sup> Unlike the first step, this one is not a matter of “immediate knowledge,” but involves an *act of conscious willing* on my part: the resolve *not* to doubt the reality of the practical power that was immediately revealed to me in my knowledge that I am acting (i.e., in step one of the argument). I then have to *decide* that the kind of willing that is demanded of me is at the same time the very essence of reason itself: that is, that reason is fundamentally *practical* and hence *purposeful*, since, as a mere analysis of the concept of free action reveals, such an action is always directed at some end or goal and is thus “purposeful.” It follows that whenever I heed the voice of conscience I can be assured that my behavior is *rational* and therefore that it serves some *purpose*, for, “as a rational being who has already been assigned an end by its mere decision, I cannot act simply for nothing and for the sake of nothing.”<sup>40</sup> (This last point will turn out to be crucial to Fichte’s deduction of the necessity of belief in another, supersensible world, one in which my lawful willing is guaranteed actually to have an effect and thus to serve some purpose, even

37. “I know immediately [*Ich weiß unmittelbar*] only what I ought to do” (BG, Bk. III, § 91, GA, I/6, 298; SW, II, 305; VM, 112–13).

38. “This voice leads me beyond representations, beyond mere knowing and to something lying outside of the same and completely opposed to it, to something that is higher than all knowing and contains within itself the final end of knowing. Whenever I act, I will undoubtedly know that I am acting and know how I am acting. But such knowledge is not the acting itself; it merely observes this acting.—This voice thus announces to me precisely what I am seeking: something lying beyond all knowing, and fully independent of it with respect to its being. It is simply so, and I know this immediately” (BG, Bk. III, §§5–6; GA, I/6, 253–54; SW, 249; VM, 67–68).

39. BG, Bk. III, § 72; GA, I/6, 286; SW, II, 291; VM, 101.

40. BM, Bk. III, § 58; GA, I/6, 278; SW, VI, 280; VM, 92.

if it appears to serve none in the sensible world.)<sup>41</sup> Once having resolved to treat dutiful willing as “rational,”<sup>42</sup> I am then, according to Fichte, also committed to recognizing the rationality of *whatever else* may be required for the *possibility* of such willing—which further entails that I must also profess my rational belief in the *reality* of anything else that may be “presupposed by the possibility of . . . obedience [to the voice of conscience],” the reality of which I have consciously *refused* to call into question.<sup>43</sup>

In order to determine these additional requirements and thereby to “deduce” these necessary beliefs, one must engage in what Fichte here describes as “philosophical speculation,” the ultimate aim of which is not simply to identify the conditions necessary for the possibility of dutiful action, but also to discover “the origin of that voice in me that directs me beyond representations.”<sup>44</sup> Such an inquiry is clearly “transcendental” in the sense that it seeks to discover the *conditions for the possibility* of carrying out my previous resolve to act dutifully and to believe in the reality of my own freedom; yet it bears no resemblance to the rigorous “synthetic” or “genetic” and thoroughly a priori method of construction in intuition based upon abstraction and reflection employed in Fichte’s scientific writings of the preceding period. Instead, the argument of Book III employs, as we shall see, a rather unholy mixture of *conceptual analysis*<sup>45</sup> and *psychological observation* and therefore cannot claim for itself the kind of universality

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41. “Obviously my obedience to this inner voice does not serve the end of the natural earthly world; *therefore* there must be a supersensible world, the ends of which it does serve” (BM, Bk. III, § 58; GA, I/6, 278; SW, II, 281; VM, 93; emphasis added).

42. “The will is the living principle of reason, it is reason itself, if reason is grasped purely and independently” (BM, Bk. III, § 68; GA, I/6, 284; SW, 288; VM, 99).

43. “Nor can I refuse to believe in the reality that these [i.e., the commands of conscience] bring along with them without at the same time denying my vocation. It is simply true, without any further examination and justification [*Begründung*]. That I ought to obey that voice is the first truth and the ground of all other truth and certainty; therefore, in this way of thinking everything becomes true and certain for me that is presupposed as true and certain by the possibility of such obedience” (BM, Bk. III, § 32; GA, I/6, 261; SW, II, 259; VM, 76). “The laws of action for rational beings are *immediately* certain; their world is certain only by virtue of the fact *that those laws are certain*” (BM, Bk. III, § 37; GA, I/6, 265; SW, II, 263; VM, 79).

44. Granted that I immediately know that I am summoned by an inner voice to engage in free, dutiful action; nevertheless, continues Fichte, “I have already begun to engage in philosophical speculation, and the doubts this has aroused in me will secretly persist and continue to disturb me. Having now placed myself in this position, I can never be fully satisfied until everything that I accept has been justified before the judgment seat of speculation. I must therefore ask myself: how does it become justified?” (BM, Bk. III, § 7; GA, I/6, 254; SW, VI, 249; VM, 68).

and necessity that Fichte claims for the deductions contained in the *Wissenschaftslehre* proper. This, of course, should come as no surprise, since what we are concerned to do in Book III is not actually to discover the “conditions for the possibility” of anything whatsoever, let alone the “necessary and universal” conditions of the same (whether of consciousness itself or of its world of experience), but rather to determine what a human being must allegedly *believe to be real* and also to believe in the reality of his own ability to create concepts of ends for himself and in his practical power.

What Book III presents is therefore not really a “transcendental deduction” in the Kantian or Fichtean sense, but rather what Ives Radrizzani has called an “argument of belief.” To be sure, Fichte clearly did not think that the task of Book III was actually to *produce any beliefs* in his reader. On the contrary, as he explained in his 1798 essay *Über den Grund unseres Glaubens in eine göttliche Weltregierung*, the beliefs in question—in freedom, immortality, and God—are all assumed to be *already present* in the human mind and thus can simply be presupposed as “facts.” The task of philosophy, even popular philosophy, is not to *produce* such beliefs, but rather to *explain* the otherwise puzzling fact that we possess them in the first place and to do so by “deriving” them from “the way in which every rational being operates.”<sup>46</sup> Now, this is plainly a new task, one that had not previously been envisioned by Fichte for the *Wissenschaftslehre*, which, however one might understand it, is certainly not to be understood—as Günter Zöller has reminded us—as a “philosophy of belief.”<sup>47</sup> Let us consider therefore the fundamental differences between a transcendental deduction, as that term is used in the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*, and the kind of “argument of belief” one finds in Book III of *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*.

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45. Thus, for example, Fichte proposes to demonstrate that the “law of the spiritual world” *must be a will* simply by analyzing the bare concept of such a law: “*Ich will mir nehmlich diesen Begriff, der nun da steht, fest und gebildet, und welchem ich nichts hyinzuthun kann oder dar, nur erklären und auf ein ander setzen*” (BM, Bk. III; GA, I/6, 291; SW, II, 297; VM, 105–106).

46. GA, I/5, 348; SW, V, 178; English trans. Daniel Breazeale, “On the Basis of Our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World,” in *Fichte: Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings (1797–1800)* [henceforth, IWL] (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1994), 143–44: “We by no means wish our argument to be used as a means for convincing the unbeliever; instead, we wish it to be considered as a derivation of the believer’s conviction. Our sole concern is to answer the causal question: ‘how does a human being arrive at this belief?’”

47. “Der Glaubensbegriff trifft bei Fichte also nur in einem ganz spezifischen Zusammenhang in den Vordergrund und avanciert zu keinem Zeitpunkt zu einem Grundbegriff der WL als solcher. Vielmehr fungiert er im metaphysischen, propädeutischen und populärphilosophischen Umfeld der WL, sowie in deren Anwendung auf den Themenbereich Religion. Zu keiner Zeit hat Fichte daran gedacht, Transzendentalphilosophie als Glaubenslehre zu entwickeln” (Zöller, “Das Element aller Gewissheit,” 36).

But before proceeding any farther, let us first pause to remind ourselves of what is at stake here and to review the catechism of items that one must, according to Fichte, believe to be real in order to believe in the reality of one's own free efficacy. One must, it is claimed in Book III, necessarily believe in the following:

- in the reality of one's *own actions* and in the determinate (moral) *laws* governing the same;<sup>48</sup>
- in the *real difference* that one's dutiful actions will make;<sup>49</sup>
- in the reality of those *other finite rational beings* whose freedom one is obliged to respect;<sup>50</sup>
- in the reality of that *sensible world* in which one is obliged to act;<sup>51</sup>
- in the reality of *progress* in humanity's efforts to subordinate the *natural world* to our own moral ends, and that we will ultimately *succeed* in this effort;<sup>52</sup>
- in the reality of *social progress*, and that human beings, by acting together, will *finally succeed in establishing* a truly free, just, and equal social order, which will eliminate the very possibility of evil;<sup>53</sup>

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48. "What grounds all consciousness of a reality outside ourselves is the necessary belief in our freedom and power to act [*Kraft*], in our actual acting [*unsere wirkliches Handeln*] and in the determinate laws of human acting. Such consciousness [of external reality] is itself only a belief, since it is grounded on a belief [in our own acting], but it is a belief that necessarily follows from the latter belief" (BM, Bk. III, § 37; GA, I/6, 265; SW, II, 263; VM, 79).

49. "The same thing in me that requires me to think I ought to act in a certain way also compels me to believe that something will result from this action. It opens to my mind's eye the prospect of another world, one that really is a *world*, a *situation or state of affairs* [*Zustand*]*—not an action*, but a world that is *different and better* than the one that presents itself to my sensible eye" (BM, Bk. III, § 39; GA, I/6, 266; VM, 80–81).

50. See BM, Bk. III, § 33; GA, I/6, 262; VM, 76–77.

51. See BM, Bk. III, §§ 34–35; GM, I/6, 262–63; VM, 77–78.

52. See BM, Bk. III, § 44; GA, I/6, 268–69; SW, II, 268; VM, 83.

53. See BM, Bk. III, §§ 46–52; GA, I/6: 271–76. "This is the end or goal of our earthly life, which reason prescribes for us and the infallible achievement of which it guarantees. This is no goal for which we ought to strive merely in order to exercise our strength on something great but the reality of which we might perhaps have to give up. It shall, it must become real. At some time in the future this end must be achieved, just as surely as there is a sensible world and a race of rational beings in time to whom nothing serious and rational is thinkable at all apart from this end and whose existence becomes intelligible only through it" (BM, Bk. III, § 53; GA, I/6, 276; SW, II, 278; VM, 90–91).

- in the reality of an endless sequence of *future sensible lives* and worlds in which one will continue to act;<sup>54</sup>
- in the reality of a *supersensible world* in which one's dutiful willing is immediately efficacious;<sup>55</sup>
- in the reality of a distinctive *law* (the moral law) governing this spiritual world;<sup>56</sup>
- in the reality of the *One infinite will*, understood as the law of the supersensible world;<sup>57</sup>
- in the reality of the One infinite will, understood as the *original source or ground* both of one's own absolute *freedom* and one's own particular *duties*;<sup>58</sup>
- in the reality of the One infinite will, understood as the *spiritual band* that preserves and *unifies the supersensible community* of finite I's and is also the *original source or ground* of one's *knowledge of other finite free beings*;<sup>59</sup>
- in the reality of the One infinite will, understood as the *creator* of those *original limitations* that constitute each finite I and hence is the ground of the sensible world of nature for each finite I as well as the ground of that *harmony* between all their individual limitations that allows them to experience the same empirical world.<sup>60</sup>

Considered in its totality, such an "argument of belief" purports to achieve both of the goals stated near the beginning of Book III: first, it is a quasi-transcendental "derivation" of belief in God from one's belief in one's ability to act dutifully, and, second, it shows that one must believe God to be not only the creator of the supersensible and sensible worlds and the original source of every finite rational being, but also to be the source of

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54. See BM, Bk. III, §§ 64–69; GA, I/6, 282–85; VM, 96–100.

55. See BM, Bk. III, §§ 57–60; GA, I/6, 278–79; VM, 92–93.

56. See BM, Bk. III, §§ 77–78; GA, I/6, 289–91; VM, 104–105.

57. See BM, Bk. III, §§ 79–82; GA, I/6, 291–93; VM, 105–107.

58. See BM, Bk. III, § 83; GA, I/6, 293–94; VM, 107–108.

59. See BM, Bk. III, § 83; GA, I/6, 294–95; VM, 108–109.

60. See BM, Bk. III, §§ 84–86; GA, I/6, 295–96; VM, 110–11.

that “inner voice” of conscience, with the immediate knowledge of which Book III began. No longer must one view one’s awareness of concrete duty either as an inexplicable “fact of reason” or as some sort of “inscrutable limit” upon one’s otherwise arbitrary freedom (which is how Fichte himself had sometimes described it in the past).<sup>61</sup> One can now see this voice of conscience for what it truly is: an “oracle from the eternal world.”<sup>62</sup> To put this in another way, what the “argument of belief” in Book III purports to show is that one’s immediate awareness of moral obligation is the *ideal ground* of belief in God and that God, in turn, is the *real ground* of the voice of conscience.

But why does Fichte think that we *must* believe these things? What kind of “arguments” does he offer for this conclusion? A close examination of Book III shows that he advances his derivation of our allegedly “necessary” beliefs in two quite different ways: sometimes by means of *conceptual analysis* and sometimes by means of *empirical psychological observations and generalizations*.

As an example of the first kind of argument, one could refer to Fichte’s claim that a simple analysis of the concept of “acting” is sufficient to reveal that one cannot act without thinking of a goal of one’s action nor without thinking of some future state of the world that will embody the same. Another example would be the assertion that we can easily grasp that any “law” of the supersensible world must be understood as a “will” simply by analyzing the bare concept of such a law.<sup>63</sup> One might cite many other, similar examples from Book III, such as the argument that we simply must posit for ourselves a final end beyond any of those that (as we must also believe) will be accomplished at some future time and/or in some future sensible life. We must do this, says Fichte, because the concept of “endless striving” is already contained in the concept of humanity, and thus, if all of

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61. See, e.g., *System der Sittenlehre*, GA, I/5, 101–102; SW, IV, 101; SE, 97–98 and *GüB*, GA, I/5, 353; SW, V, 184; IWL, 149.

62. BM, Bk. III, § 82; GA, I/6, 298; SW, II, 292; VM, 107.

63. “Can I will without willing something? Never! . . . In my thinking each of my *acts* is immediately connected, merely according to the laws of thinking, with some *being* that lies in the future, with some state of affairs to which my action is related as a cause to an effect” (BM, Bk. III, § 38; GA, I/6, 265; SW, II, 264; VM, 79–80). “What kind of law of the spiritual world is it that I am thinking about? For I am anxious only to explain and to analyze [*nur erklären und aus ein ander setzen*] this concept [of a law of the supersensible world] that now stands before me, fixed and fully formed, and to which I neither can nor am allowed to add anything” (BM, Bk. III, § 79; GA, I/6, 291; SW, II, 297; VM, 105–106).



our goals were to be accomplished, then “humanity would then have come to a halt on its path, and for this reason its earthly goal cannot be its highest one.”<sup>64</sup> (Admittedly, it remains unclear—at least to this reader—what “endless striving” might mean with respect to the supersensible world, but this is nevertheless Fichte’s claim.)

More interesting, perhaps, are the arguments based on what appear to be psychological claims about what a person has to believe in order to avoid *despair*. This type of argument is employed at several crucial junctures in Book III, starting with the very first step. The reason I simply must resolve to believe in the reality of my ability to heed the voice of conscience, that is, the reason that I must reject out of hand the purely theoretical possibility that my freedom might be illusory, is simply because *if* I were to take these doubts seriously *then* “all seriousness and interest would be completely expunged from my life, which would then be transformed, along with my thinking, into nothing but a game, proceeding from nothing and going toward nothing.”<sup>65</sup> A bit later, Fichte deploys a similar argument to show that we must believe in the eventual and complete subjugation of the *natural world* to our moral ends, because this is what is demanded by the laws of practical reason, and if we were to denounce these laws and give up our belief that we could fulfill them, then, “we ourselves, along with the world, would sink into absolute nothingness.”<sup>66</sup> Exactly the same argument is then used to demonstrate the necessity of believing that *social* progress that will eventually eliminate present-day injustices and establish a truly just society. Can those intolerable social conditions that presently prevail be imagined to endure forever?, asks Fichte, to which he responds: “Never—unless the whole of human existence is a pointless and meaningless game.”<sup>67</sup>

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64. BM, Bk. III, § 54; GA, I/6, 277; SW, II, 279; VM, 91.

65. BM, Bk. III, § 19; GA, I/6, 257; SW, II, 253; VM, 71.

66. BM, Bk. III, § 37, GA, I/6, 265; SW, II, 263; VM, 79.

67. BM, Bk. III, § 46, GA, I/6, 271; SW, II, 271; VM, 85. “If the whole of human life is not to turn into a spectacle for a malicious spirit who has implanted this unquenchable yearning for the imperishable in poor humanity merely in order to be amused by their repeated grasping for something that forever eludes them, [etc., etc.]; if the wise man, who will quickly see through this game and be irked at continuing to play his part in it, is not to throw away his life, and if the moment of his awakening to reason is not to become the moment of his earthly death—then that purpose must have to be achieved. Oh, it is achievable *in life* and *by means of life*, for reason commands me to *live*. It is achievable, for—I am” (BM, Bk. III, § 53; GA, I/6, 276; SW, II, 278; VM, 90–91).

But we need not envision a *distant future* in which our human goals might fail to be achieved in order to face the threat of despair. Such a possibility—indeed, such an actuality—seems to stare us in the face every day. Every time we reflect upon the yawning gap between our good intentions and the actual results brought about by our actions in the sensible world we become acutely aware of our own absolute *incapacity* to achieve or to realize within the sensible world, by means of our own powers as finite I's, our necessary moral ends. The actual result of my free action always appears to be in the hands of the alien power of nature, which is governed by very different laws than the laws of freedom governing my purposeful actions. And such a realization, claims Fichte, is one that could all too easily lead a person to resignation and despair; and indeed, for the sake of his argument, he must insist that it would *necessarily* do so—which is why we must *necessarily* believe in the supersensible efficacy of these same actions. Thus, just as the threat of existential despair that previously accompanied skeptical doubts about the reality of human freedom was repelled by an act of resolute willing, so too is this new despair about one's ability to achieve one's moral ends in the sensible world avoided by a new resolve to believe that one is also an agent in a different, higher and nonsensible or spiritual world, one in which lawful actions inevitably bring about their intended results. Thus, declares Fichte, "let this resolve be what is first and highest in my spirit, that by which everything else is directed but which is itself neither directed by nor dependent upon anything else. Let it be the innermost principle of my spiritual life."<sup>68</sup>

(Though Fichte does not actually spell this out here, he appears to believe that we have a further moral *obligation* to come to make such a decision, since, if we did not, then we would presumably be crushed and demoralized by despair and would therefore be unable to continue to act dutifully. If so, then his reasoning on this point is not unlike Kant's in the "Dialectic of Practical Reason," where the necessity of believing in the highest good seems to be grounded in Kant's conviction that one simply could *not bear* to continue to act morally if one did not believe it would ultimately make some real difference, if not in this world then in the next.)

As was established at the beginning of Book III, a *rational* action is one that serves some purpose, and we now have concluded that "obviously my obedience to this inner voice does not serve the end of the natural earthly world"; so "*therefore* there must be a supersensible world whose end

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68. BM, Bk. III, § 57; GA, I/6, 278; SW, II, 280; V M, 92.

it serves.”<sup>69</sup> With this willful but practically necessary act of belief in the achievability of my moral end—and here one must recall that the true end of moral action does not lie in any external state of affairs whatsoever, but is simply the free determination of willing purely for its own sake—the threat of despair vanishes, and “the fog of delusion clears from my eyes; I receive a new organ and with it a new world arises for me.”<sup>70</sup>

Finally, one must at least mention another argumentative trope that is occasionally encountered in *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, though one could also say that it presides over the entire “argument of belief” in Book III: namely, the inference that I *must* believe in X because X is a requirement for fulfilling *duty* Y; and if I *ought* to do Y then I *can* do it. This, of course, is only a variation on the familiar Kantian “ought implies can” thesis, which Fichte fully endorses. But, as Wayne Martin has recently shown us, this is not an easy inference to classify. Is it an analytic proposition? a synthetic one? an empirical claim? a synthetic principle a priori?<sup>71</sup> For his part, Fichte seems to treat “ought implies can” as an analytic principle. Thus, he writes that the command to obey the moral law is “by itself my guarantee [*bürgt mir durch sich selbst*] of the certain attainment of this end. The same disposition [*Gesinnung*] with which I direct and attach my whole thought and life to this command and see nothing apart from, also brings along with it the unshakeable conviction that its promise is true and certain and eliminates the possibility of even thinking the reverse.”<sup>72</sup>

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69. BM, Bk. III, § 58; GA, I/6, 278; SW, II, 281; VM, 93; emphasis added. “But I am free, and *therefore* such a connection of causes and effects, in which freedom is absolutely superfluous and pointless, cannot exhaust my whole vocation. I ought to be free; for it is not the mechanically produced act that constitutes our true worth, but only the free determination of freedom solely for the sake of the command and for no other end at all: this is what the inner voice of conscience tells us” (BM, Bk. III, § 61; GA, I/6, 279; SW, II, 282; VM, 93–94; emphasis added).

70. BM, Bk. III, § 59, GA, I/6, 278; SW, II, 281; VM, 93. Another example of such an “argument” may be found in Fichte’s “deduction” of the necessity in believing that one will experience a whole series of future sensible lives: “The present life cannot reasonably be thought of as the entire end of my existence or of the existence of mankind as such. There is something in me and something is demanded of me which finds no application in this entire life and which is utterly pointless and superfluous for the highest that can be produced on earth. Man must therefore have an end that lies beyond this life” (BM, Bk. III, § 64; GA, I/6, 282; SW, II, 285–86; VM, 96–97). Again, note Fichte’s inference: our lives would be *pointless* if this were the only world, *therefore* we must believe that there will be another one.

71. See Wayne Martin, “Ought but Cannot,” *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society* 109 (2009): 103–28.

72. BM, Bk. III, § 30; GA, I/6, 266; SW, II, 265; VM, 80.

But this is an *odd* kind of analyticity, based ultimately upon a claim about which “convictions” are contained in or identical with others. So perhaps the use made of the “ought implies can” principle in Book III shows that it too is not an analytic but a synthetic, indeed an empirical principle, one rooted in a problematic understanding of human psychology: not “ought implies can,” but rather, “if one *believes* one *ought* to do something then one must *believe* one *can* do so.”

### The Unique and Problematic Status of the *Vocation of Man* within Fichte’s Overall Development

So what is one to make of all of this? First of all, one might simply point out that it is by no means self-evident that a human being cannot in fact live with the kind of moral “despair” that Fichte seems to believe would be simply intolerable. As evidence for such a claim, one might cite (anachronistically, to be sure), the writings of such twentieth-century authors as Albert Camus and Miguel de Unamuno, both of whom would disagree with Kant and Fichte on this point and insist that one can indeed manage to live “tragically but happily”—striving to do one’s duty and to act freely without any assurance or indeed any hope that one’s goals will ever be achieved by one’s actions. Sisyphus, after all, knows that he will never get that rock to stay on top of the mountain, and yet Camus imagines him not “desperate,” but “happy”—and urges us to emulate him. And why not?

It really does not matter whether one finds such examples to be persuasive or not, since what we are ultimately dealing with here are empirical claims about what human beings simply *must* believe to be the case, claims that plainly cannot be proved or verified within transcendental philosophy, at least not by the kind of transcendental philosophy one finds in the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*. Nor can these claims be established by Fichte’s own “argument of belief,” since they all depend, as we have now seen, upon another empirical and deeply problematic psychological claim, one that serves as the primary principle of inference in Book III—namely, that one simply cannot believe in one’s moral vocation unless one *also* believes that one can actually accomplish one’s moral ends—and which is simply and tacitly *presupposed without argument*. But if one challenges this claim, as I do and as I imagine many other contemporary readers will be willing to do as well, then Fichte’s “argument of belief” loses its force and the conclusions reached in Book III no longer appear to be “necessary beliefs” at all, but reveal themselves to be either straightforward errors based on a principle of

inference derived from a factual mistake about human psychology or else to be simple instances of “wishful thinking.”

One must therefore turn elsewhere for a genuinely philosophical account of the relationship between the finite self and the absolute will. But anyone who turns to the second half of the *Wissenschaftslehre nova methodo* for enlightenment on this topic is likely to be as perplexed and frustrated by the role of the “pure will” within the fivefold synthesis in which this work culminates and as confused about the relation of the same to the finite I as Fichte himself apparently was—at least to judge from the internal breakdown of his repeated efforts to revise the same for publication, as poignantly recorded in the manuscript of the unfinished *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1800.

My own view of the matter is that this issue occupied the center of Fichte’s philosophical attention for the rest of his career, and that the striking differences between the later and earlier versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre* are to be explained primarily as reflecting his continued efforts to find an appropriate philosophical framework for resolving the “tension” between the I and the absolute, an unresolved tension that does not represent a *departure* from the Jena *Wissenschaftslehre* but is instead the final *product* of the same. Viewed in this context, the “argument from belief” in Book III of *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* represents neither a *rejection* of the earlier system nor an *anticipation* of the later one, but stands on its own as an *admonitory object lesson* concerning what can go wrong when one confuses the standpoints of speculation and life and tries to solve problems within transcendental philosophy by appealing to the lessons of “experience.”

## Determination and Freedom in Kant and in Fichte's *Bestimmung des Menschen*

ANGELICA NUZZO

Even a superficial look at the philosophical production of the period “between Kant and Hegel” reveals that there is a family of terms, which are employed as frequently as no others—sometimes casually in the aftermath of the scholastic tradition, sometimes in a programmatic way, sometimes to introduce new (and not so new) philosophical slogans—of whose importance, however, interpreters not often seem aware. This is the terminological family that covers the theme of *Bestimmen/Bestimmung* and their Latin correspondent *determinare/determinatio*.

An analysis of the constellation of problems disclosed by this family of terms can offer a useful entry point into the issue of the confrontation between Kant and Fichte. More specifically, I suggest that some doctrines that methodologically distinguish Fichte's from Kant's transcendental philosophy—for example, the idea of the unity of the human being that Fichte uses against Kant's separation between sensibility and understanding or the concrete ethics that Fichte develops against Kant's formalism—are closely tied to particular decisions taken on the meaning of determination.

I shall address a limited case of this broader issue. I propose to read *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* as Fichte's own solution of Kant's third antinomy, a solution that turns on the idea of freedom as *moral self-determination*. Fichte's work offers, at the same time, a critique of Kant's idea of transcendental freedom and its transformation within the framework of his concrete ethics. I discuss first the transition from psychology to cosmology in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, where at stake is the problem of thinking, within

the transcendental framework, the human “subject” in its distinction from the natural “objects” of the world. The solution to this problem requires, for Kant, the shift from the metaphysical thought of the disembodied soul of the Paralogisms to a different idea of existence in the world—a form of *present* existence “determined,” as it were, differently than through the mere mechanism of nature. It is at this juncture that I locate the point of connection between theoretical determination and practical determinability and the context within which the cosmological idea of freedom is introduced as Kant’s solution of the third antinomy. Henceforth, I shall render the German *Bestimmung* with determination. My task is to show how the transition from the theoretical to the practical meaning of *Bestimmung*, hence to the notion of *vocatio*, is accomplished.

### Kant. Determining Existence: From Objects to the Subject

The result of the Paralogisms is the denial that the purely formal “I think” can know itself in any other way but through the *empirical determination* of sensible intuition. The formal idea of a thinking subject remains indeterminate if no recourse is made to empirical determination. This, however, posits the subject in the realm of space and time and makes of it one of the many “objects” of nature. Empirical self-determination is not sufficient to confer on the “I think” that privileged place in the universe that the metaphysical idea of immortality intended to guarantee. At the end of the Paralogisms, the transcendently embodied subject, triumphant over the metaphysical disembodied soul, is projected onto a transfigured world. Surprisingly, what appears to the subject that empirically knows itself through the affection of sensibility is not the mechanism of nature but a world thought *in analogy* with it. For a moment, reason’s “order of purposes” replaces understanding’s “order of nature.”<sup>1</sup> While the metaphysical idea of immortality does not determine myself as subject, the reference to reason’s order of ends holds the promise of a different type of determination. At stake is the possibility of extending the order of ends, and with it “our own existence, beyond the limits of experience and life.”<sup>2</sup> Kant’s suggestion

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1. B, 425.

2. Ibid.; for the technical distinction to which Kant refers with the term *domain* see KU, §II; for the close connection in which “experience,” “existence,” and “life” are defined in the present context see also B, 420 where “experience” is “our existence in life.”

regards the possibility of a different type of “experience” of the world and a different “life” and “existence” in it.

Kant’s argument carries out an “analogy with the nature of living beings in this world.” The simple presence of the moral law in us allows us to infer the idea of a “citizenship” in a world that we value as “better” than the world of nature.<sup>3</sup> The “absolute demand for a better world”<sup>4</sup> that Fichte advances in Book III of *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* closely echoes this Kantian suggestion. The conclusion of the Paralogisms points to the discovery of a different “domain” in which a different way of judging or *determining* the “world” (namely, through moral values rather than through the understanding’s categories)<sup>5</sup> discloses an alternative way of thinking and living in it—a different way of *determining* one’s place within it. We are not only parts of this world but we can claim a right of “citizenship” in it.

In the “transition”<sup>6</sup> to the Antinomies, Kant moves from the problem of representing the “I think” as the *object* of thought and cognition, to the possibility of thinking of it as a genuine *subject* of action. The subject is presented, henceforth, as “*acting subject*” or “*active being*,”<sup>7</sup> whereby it receives a characterization that the “I think” of speculative reason could never attain. The possibility for pure reason to have a practical employment is predicated upon the possibility of representing the subject as subject of a distinctive form of causality within the world of nature, so that this causality is compatible or noncontradictory with the framework laid out by the Analytic.

The transcendental construction of nature is based upon the claim that the “I think” is “merely the logical function of thinking” that needs the *determination* of an empirical intuition in order to yield *knowledge* of objects. To this extent, there is no difference between our knowledge of given outer objects and our knowledge of ourselves in our determinate existence.<sup>8</sup> If I do not aim at *knowing* myself in my determinate empirical

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3. B, 426.

4. SW II, 264. Unlike Kant, however, Fichte projects the “better world” in the future thereby offering his own alternative to the soul’s future immortality of rational psychology.

5. B, 425. Recall the “noble constitution of the soul” in *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer*, AA II, 372f.

6. B, 428ff., “General Remark Concerning the Transition from Rational Psychology to Cosmology.”

7. KrV B, 569/A, 541: “*handelndes Subjekt*” and “*tätiges Wesen*.”

8. See B, 158 (§25)—the “*so wie . . .*” that puts on the same plane the mere thought of myself and my thinking of external objects.



existence but only at *thinking* of myself regardless of any intuition, then I do not represent myself as mere appearance. However, this merely logical thought does not prove the existence of an immaterial soul. While in the first case I know myself as *determinate* object (as appearance) with regard to my existence, in the second I am a mere *indeterminate* object of thinking in general: nothing allows me to qualify the subject as “subject” since this is nothing more to me than an entirely empty object of which no knowledge is possible.

In the “transition” to cosmology, Kant opens up a new possibility of representing the subject. This is still described by the category of cause, although its causality follows from a different principle than the one that rules natural phenomena.<sup>9</sup> The crucial issue is the *determination of the existence of the subject as a new kind of determinability*. The *alternative between empirical determination and logical indeterminateness*, ultimately responsible for the failure of rational psychology, can be overcome only if we can find a form of determination of our existence that does not require the intuition of space and time but takes place completely a priori. Kant advances a hypothetical thought:

[S]hould it be granted that we may . . . discover . . . ground for regarding ourselves as *legislating completely a priori with regard to our own existence*, and as *determining this existence*, there would thereby be revealed a *spontaneity* through which our *reality* would be *determinable*, independently of the conditions of empirical intuition. Herein we would become aware that in the consciousness of our existence there is contained something a priori, which can serve to *determine our existence*—the *complete determination* of which is possible only in sensible terms—as being in relation, with respect to a certain inner faculty, to an intelligible world.<sup>10</sup>

Throughout the *Analytic*, Kant conjoins the spontaneity through which thinking determines its objects with the determinability proper to the senses’ receptivity. To produce knowledge, the spontaneity of thinking must determine its object with regard to empirical intuition so that the determined object of cognition is necessarily appearance in space and time.

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9. B, 431f. The concept of cause will have, in this case, a meaning that is only “analogical” to the one displayed in its theoretical use.

10. B, 430f.; emphasis added.

Kant's suggestion, at this point, addresses a new possibility: Can we think without contradiction of a different form of spontaneity that would not require the conditions of intuition and yet would still determine the subject's existence a priori? This type of spontaneity would still entail a kind of "legislation" or (normative) determination. Yet, unlike the spontaneity that intervenes in cognition, it would indeed be "absolute" or "unconditioned" because not constitutively dependent upon sensibility. It would be a (capacity for) *determination* not itself determinable and referred to a *determinability* different than receptivity. Since this spontaneity would not determine my existence cognitively, it would not be a psychological concept. The issue thereby raised regards, in fact, the sphere of cosmology. This is the first step that allows Kant to shift the traditional problem of spontaneity from psychology to cosmology, from cognitive determination to a different kind of determinability.<sup>11</sup>

### Spontaneity and Determination

In the tradition of Leibniz and Wolff the concept of *spontaneitas* belongs to empirical psychology.<sup>12</sup> Wolff translates *spontaneitas* with *Willkür*, thereby identifying them. Spontaneity is the activity of determining oneself to action through an internal ground or inner principle. Herein, he repeats Leibniz's thesis that "an action is spontaneous when its ground is contained in the agent."<sup>13</sup> Wolff maintains that to the extent that the soul has in itself the ground determining its actions, the soul has a will.<sup>14</sup> Freedom is

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11. See B, 476; A, 448 where both transitions (namely, from psychology to cosmology, and from the theoretical sphere to the practical issue of "imputability") are mentioned.

12. See B, 476; A, 448: Kant rejects the view that the "transcendental idea of freedom" constitutes the empirical content of psychology. A historical reconstruction of the sources of Kant's notion of spontaneity in the Antinomies is in R. Finster, "Spontaneität, Freiheit und unbedingte Kausalität bei Leibniz, Crusius, und Kant," *Studia Leibnitiana*, 14, no. 2 (1982): 266–77. More generally, S. Rosen, "Is Thinking Spontaneous?," in *Kant's Legacy: Essays in Honor of Lewis White Beck*, ed. P. Cicovacki (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2001), 3–23; finally, see for the general argument A. Nuzzo, *Ideal Embodiment. Kant's Theory of Sensibility* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008), Part II.

13. G. W. Leibniz, *Essais de théodicée sur la bonté de dieu, la liberté de l'homme et l'origine du mal* (Amsterdam, 1710), III, §290. See Ch. Wolff, *Psychologia empirica* (Francofurti & Lipsiae, 1732), 1738, §933: "*Spontaneitas est principium sese ad agendum determinandi intrinsecum.*"

14. Ch. Wolff, *Deutsche Metaphysik. Vernünfftige Gedancken von Gott, der Welt und die Seele des Menschen, auch allen Dingen überhaupt* (Halle, 1719–1720), §518.

spontaneity because it implies the will's capacity of choice. "Freedom of the soul is the capacity of choosing spontaneously, among many possibilities, the one that we like, without being determined in ourselves to any of them." Wolff's discussion of *spontaneitas* is based on the principle of determining or sufficient reason.<sup>15</sup>

Against Wolff, Baumgarten views *arbitrium* or *Willkür* as an independent faculty of the soul different from spontaneity. "*Actio spontanea*" is an "action that depends upon a sufficient ground internal to the agent."<sup>16</sup> This, however, does not imply possession of will. Crucial for the connection between spontaneity and freedom is Crusius's rejection of Leibniz's and Wolff's *spontaneitas* as based upon the principle of determining reason. Freedom is a "fundamental force"<sup>17</sup> that acts with no antecedent determination—neither external nor internal. Thereby he refutes the universal validity of the principle of determining reason, which inescapably leads to universal determinism. Since freedom is the capacity to start a series of events with no determination, Crusius defines it as unconditioned force or unconditioned causality. This debate is important for both Kant and Fichte—for the former, in the perspective of a critique of metaphysics, for the latter, from early on, in view of an alternative to determinism and to the conclusions of Kant's critique.<sup>18</sup>

In the Antinomies, Kant criticizes the traditional concept of spontaneity. The Leibnizian-Wolffian soul as substance endowed with an original spontaneous activity cannot be saved from universal determinism. To this extent, although Kant seems to endorse Crusius's shift from spontaneity as internal determination to freedom as original causality,<sup>19</sup> his critique affects Crusius as well insofar as he still works within the metaphysical tradition. And yet, the problem of spontaneity remains, for Kant, a problem of "determination." He still considers determination and spontaneity as parts of the

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15. Ch. Wolff, *Psychologia empirica*, cit., §941 for the definition of freedom, and §934 for the connection with the principle of sufficient reason.

16. A. G. Baumgarten, *Metaphysica* (Halle, 1739), §704.

17. "Thätige Grundkraft." For the notion of *Grundkraft* see Ch. A. Crusius, *Entwurf der nothwendigen Vernunft-Wahrheiten* (Leipzig: Gleditsch, 1745), §§70–78, §81; for a discussion of freedom and spontaneity: *Anweisung vernünftig zu leben* (Leipzig: Gleditsch, 1744), §§40–41.

18. In this perspective, Fichte takes up again Leibniz's thought, see M. Gueroult, *L'évolution et la structure de la Doctrine de la Science chez Fichte* (Hildesheim: Olms, 1982), 3–153.

19. For Kant's relation to Crusius, see M. Wundt, *Kant als Metaphysiker* (Stuttgart: Enke, 1924).

same problem. To determine means “to judge synthetically,”<sup>20</sup> whereby the problem of determination is brought to bear on the central question of the possibility of a priori synthetic judgments.<sup>21</sup> Spontaneity distinguishes understanding from sensibility and sets it apart as a radically separated branch of our cognitive faculty. As the “spontaneity” of understanding is opposed to the “receptivity” of sensibility, Kant seems to have an easy task in neatly assigning the part that spontaneity and receptivity respectively play in the synthesis of cognition: spontaneity is “*bestimmend*” (determining), while sensibility is “*bloß bestimmbar*” (merely determinable).<sup>22</sup>

As uncontroversial as this distinction seems to be, things are complicated by a fundamental ambiguity, which appeared already in the foregoing discussion. Determination seems to be the province of two very different activities. On the one hand, the understanding’s spontaneity operates on the determinable of sensibility: to determine an object for intuition means to know an object determinately under concepts.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, however, to the extent that sensibility displays pure a priori forms, the determinable of sensibility is itself a source of determination: intuition is, in this case, the source of a determination that is singular and captures the individuality which escapes the concept. Fichte, who famously takes Kant to hold a strict dualism of sensibility and understanding, in rejecting such dualism unifies the two meanings of determination—conceptual and intuitive—that consequently merge into one unique concept of *Bestimmung*. Determination is now, at once, conceptual and intuitive, universal and individual, theoretical and practical.<sup>24</sup>

On the separation of sensibility and understanding hinges Kant’s thesis of transcendental idealism, which provides the “key to the solution”<sup>25</sup> of the cosmological dialectic. Kant distinguishes the thesis of the ideality of space and time from “material idealism” and its denial of or doubt toward

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20. *Fortschritte der Metaphysik*, AA, XX, 268, 13.

21. See S. K. Lee, “The Synthetic A Priori in Kant and German Idealism,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie* 91 (2009): 288–329, which, however, is unhelpful as it simply offers a collection of passages.

22. B, 152.

23. See B. Longuenesse, *Kant and the Human Standpoint* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2005), 211–35, 216.

24. Clearly, this transformation shows the way in which Fichte’s intellectual intuition actually determines.

25. B, 518; A, 490 title.

the existence of external things<sup>26</sup>—the two forms of idealism that Book II of Fichte's *Bestimmung* identifies as leading to the same cognitive *impasse*. The claim that our knowledge is necessarily limited by space and time allows Kant to introduce the possibility of a different causality and spontaneity independent of that condition. Instead, if we were to free our knowledge from the constitutive and determinative reference to sensibility,<sup>27</sup> this possibility would have to be entirely ruled out. The result would be universal determinism with no appeal. Spontaneity of thinking and spontaneity of freedom would not be distinguishable. Spontaneity would only designate the way in which, for Aristotle (in Wolff's rendition) the fire's flames move upward spontaneously.<sup>28</sup> In an early reflection on Baumgarten's *Metaphysica* (ca. 1769) that matches the conclusion of Book II of Fichte's *Bestimmung*, Kant suggests that the "idealist" "sees all his external (actual) representations as spontaneous."<sup>29</sup> For the idealist, the denial of the existence of external things is one with the rejection of receptivity. Since the idealist does not recognize the transcendental role that sensibility plays in determining representations of objects as *external*, all representations are, for him, internally produced, hence "spontaneous." For Kant, however, internal self-production is not freedom. Herein he agrees with Fichte's rejection of idealism in Book II of the *Bestimmung*.

### Fichte, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*

To Fichte, who proclaims that "the human being . . . is absolutely one"<sup>30</sup> against Kant's split of sensibility and understanding, and who accordingly does not consider the thesis of transcendental idealism key for a true solution of the antinomy, Kant's suggestion in the transition to cosmology—namely, the adumbration of a different type of determination and determinability than the cognitive one—opens up a constellation of new

26. See B, 519; A, 491 and 491n.

27. Or, which is the same, if we assume that space and time are not transcendental forms of our sensibility but properties of things in themselves.

28. Ch. Wolff, *Psychologia empirica*, cit., §933. See R. Goclenius's influential *Lexicon philosophicum* (Francofurti: Typis Mathiae Beckeri, 1613), 1080–81: *Sponte*: "Ignis per se ipse ac sua sponte movetur, consumptus sua sponte extinguitur."

29. *Reflexion* 4094 (on *Metaphysica* §392). Here the idealist is opposed to the "egoist."

30. SW II, 255f.

possibilities useful for reshaping the problem of freedom under the new non-dualistic assumption. Now I propose to view *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* as an example of the transformation of Kant's transcendental framework that follows from the rejection of transcendental idealism and leads to a different view of determination and determinability. Such a view allows Fichte to consider the idea of moral *Bestimmung* in Book III as the true solution to the problem that neither deterministic materialism nor idealism are able to resolve. For Fichte, a more decisively practical notion of *Bestimmung* than the one proposed by materialism and idealism is needed in order to lead out of determinism. The move that we have now to consider goes from Kant's idea of freedom as unconditioned determination to Fichte's imperative of self-determination as the realization of one's *Bestimmung*. First, I examine the connection between determination and duty, showing how Fichte reshapes it; then I argue that the new concept of determination becomes the key for Fichte's own solution of the antinomy of freedom and determinism.

The Enlightenment antecedent of Fichte's *Bestimmung* is Spalding's *Betrachtung über die Bestimmung des Menschen* (1748), the seminal work that brings an important strand of the notion of *Bestimmung* to the forefront in the philosophical debate. In the exchange between Abbt and Mendelssohn on Spalding's popular work (1763<sup>7</sup>),<sup>31</sup> the concept displays two interconnected meanings. *Bestimmung*, underlines Abbt, indicates both "how man should determine himself (*sich bestimmen*) to this or that action in order to become happy" and "the determinate (*bestimmt*) place that man occupies in

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31. Mendelssohn's *Phädon, oder über die Unsterblichkeit der Seele* (1767), to which Kant explicitly refers in the Paralogisms, arises out of Mendelssohn's discussion with Abbt on Spalding's *Betrachtung*, whose last part is dedicated precisely to the idea of immortality. Significantly, the title of Abbt's review of the seventh edition of Spalding's *Bestimmung* (1763) is *Zweifel über die Bestimmung des Menschen*—a "doubt" that is echoed in the opening section of Fichte's *Bestimmung*. This "doubt," in Abbt's presentation, hints at the skepticism and pessimism of Pierre Bayle; it is to such doubt that Mendelssohn tries to respond with a demonstration of the soul's immortality. But this is also the "doubt" raised by the *impasse* of deterministic materialism and by the skeptical conclusions of idealism—the doubt that in Fichte's 1800 work is overcome only by the idea of freedom and moral determination. There is an important (anti-)skeptical thread that guides Fichte's reflection on the concept of *Bestimmung* up to the 1800 book, and this is his relation to Maimon's *Satz des Bestimmbarkeit*, see D. Breazeale, "Der Satz der Bestimmbarkeit: Fichte's Reception and Transformation of Maimon's Principle of Synthetic Thinking," *Internationales Jahrbuch des Deutschen Idealismus/Yearbook of German Idealism* 1 (2003): 115–40 (which deals, in particular, with the *Grundlage*), and, more generally, his "Fichte on Skepticism," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 29 (1991): 427–53.

relation to the entire order of the universe.”<sup>32</sup> Herein the moral-practical significance of the term is connected to its metaphysical and cosmological meaning, although this connection is not clearly spelled out (does the moral determination to happiness follow from the “*Rang des Menschen in der Welt*” or vice versa?). Clearly, in this debate, determination is already closely related to the problematic constellation that Kant explores in the transition from the Paralogisms to the Antinomies and that Fichte addresses in the three books of *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*. For Fichte, the way in which the human being must determine herself depends on the determinate place that she occupies in the universe. He turns the connection between nature and freedom, man’s determinate place in the world and his moral determination within it, into an argument against Kant’s separation between sensibility and understanding and against the “formalism” of his ethics. On Fichte’s view, Kant’s ideas of duty and freedom are not sufficient to ground man’s true *Bestimmung*. In order to really function as “my determination”—that is: (1) to speak to me, individually, and (2) to actually determine me—such *Bestimmung* can neither be formal nor generically universal. The relevant point is that Fichte’s critique of Kant’s all too weak and not truly determining notion of practical determination holds true already in the argument with which the first *Critique* attempts to save the possibility of freedom from determinism. It is precisely this crucial juncture that Fichte tackles in *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*.

In the *System der Ethik* (1798), in discussing the principle of an “applicable ethics,”<sup>33</sup> Fichte expresses the moral command in this way: “*Fulfill your determination/vocation in every case.*” To this formulation, he immediately adds the acknowledgment of its insufficiency, whereby the further task that will occupy *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* comes to the fore. Thus expressed, observes Fichte, the moral command “still leaves to be answered the question: *What then is my determination/vocation?*” At issue is the idea of a process toward absolute independence, which, although infinite, is *determinate* in each and every step. The “series” that constitutes this infinite task or “idea” is the “ethical *Bestimmung*” of a finite rational being;<sup>34</sup> the subject’s natural determination is the starting point. In Fichte’s argument, Abbt’s analysis of the twofold meaning of *Bestimmung*—ethical

32. See M. Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften. Jubiläumsausgabe*, ed. A. Altmann, E. J. Engel, M. Brocke, D. Krochmalnik (Stuttgart: Frommann, 1972), ff. 25 in 38 vols., vol. VI. 1, 9–10; see L. Fonnesu, *Antropologia e idealismo. La destinazione dell’uomo nell’etica di Fichte*, (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1993).

33. In the “Deduction of the reality and applicability of the moral principle.”

*cum* cosmological—is appropriated and transformed within the framework of Fichte’s concrete, “applicable” ethics, and thereby used to revisit Kant’s idea of duty.

The passage from the *System der Ethik* indicates the two points that Fichte draws to the center in *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*. Determination, for Fichte, is necessarily both content-based and referred to the concrete individual. *Bestimmung* is no mere conceptual specification (of objects for cognition) but displays a *normative* validity—that is, ultimately, truly and really *determines*—if and only if it commands a determinate action and is addressed to a determinate individual (not to the abstract idea of humanity, not even to the idea of humanity in myself). Only under these conditions (1) does determination really *determine*, that is, is ground of duty, and (2) is self-determination, that is, freedom. “When applied to an empirical human being, the domain of the moral law has a *determinate starting point*: namely, the determinate state of limitation in which every individual finds himself. . . . It also has a *determinate goal*, which can never be achieved: namely, absolute liberation from all limitation. Finally, it guides us along a *completely determinate path*: namely, the order of nature.”<sup>35</sup> For Fichte, determination pervades the phenomenology of the individual concrete action in a fundamental way. First, it is the necessary *starting point* of action—the “natural” position of the individual, which is also its limitation. Second, it constitutes the *aim* of the action as a practical aim; the determination embodied in the aim consists precisely in abolishing the natural limitation: this is freedom. From this it follows “that for every determinate human being, in each situation, only one determinate something is in accord with duty, and therefore this is what is demanded by the moral law as it applies to this temporal being.”<sup>36</sup> Content-determination and application are one with the moral principle—they do not indicate successive moral tasks consisting in specifying (determining) the empty formality of duty. In fact, it is from its applicability that the principle receives true reality. Fichte’s premise is relevant here: at stake is the *application* of the domain of the moral law *to the empirical individual that is myself*. It is only within this new framework that Kant’s third antinomy can be solved, that is, that freedom becomes not only possible for a “subject” in general but realizable, actual, and determined through and through at every step for me as an individual

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34. SW IV, 150.

35. SW IV, 166; emphasis added.

36. Ibid.



concrete agent. Now the concept of *Bestimmung* is the crucial mediating link whereby the reality of duty is established.

Fichte's transformation of the moral problem accounts for the specific meaning that *Bestimmung* receives in the 1800 book. For Kant, the law is the normative source of the will's moral determination—it is that which determines the will and is not itself determinable. The form of duty is neither itself *Bestimmung* nor does it immediately determine empirical actions: with regard to the content it is necessarily *indeterminate*. In its utter formality (in its sheer *indeterminateness*) it is the act/fact (*Faktum*) of pure practical reason. The shift that the connection between duty and *Bestimmung* undergoes with Fichte can be summarized as follows: while for Kant duty determines the will, and moral action is a determination of the empty form of duty, for Fichte it is *Bestimmung* itself that, as my determination, becomes my duty. This is the central problem of *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*. Duty, for Fichte, must be based on determination, not vice versa; or: my determination is the only determination that entails a duty (hence is truly determining). For Kant, the normative force lies in the *universal form* of duty—duty determines formally what ought to be done but in order to do this it must remain indeterminate with regard to content; for Fichte, the normative force lies in the *content-based, individual* character of *Bestimmung*—determination commands that which is, determinately, my duty. Duty is always and necessarily determined—even though its complete fulfillment remains an infinite task. In sum, while for Kant determination follows from the universal form of duty; for Fichte duty follows from the content-based individual address necessarily entailed in my determination.<sup>37</sup>

In this context, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* asks its programmatic question: “What am I and what is my *Bestimmung*?” That is: I am setting out to find that content-based, individual determination which alone can function as—or prove itself to be—my *determination*, namely, that *Bestimmung* which alone (1) can speak to me and (2) can determine me, that is, can exercise the normative force of a duty, make me into a true individual, and relate me to a world that has meaning (or truly exists) for me, a world to which I participate as a worthy, determinate part. This and this only is my

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37. There is a precedent to Fichte's position here. In his discussion with Abbt, Mendelssohn underlines the connection between *Bestimmung* and duty: “Once I know that to which man is called and destined in this world (*berufen, gewidmet*), from it I can deduce how he must determine himself (*sich bestimmen*) with regard to his actions in order to fulfill his destination (*Beruf*)” (Mendelssohn, *Gesammelte Schriften*, cit., VI.1, 35f.). To know one's destination—moral *cum* cosmological—is to determine the individual basis of one's duty.

determination as my vocation. The concept of *Bestimmung* so established becomes the criterion on which to measure the insufficiency of the “determinations” proposed, respectively, by determinism and idealism. Neither the result—the alleged determination—provided by material determinism nor the result—the alleged determination—proposed by idealism satisfy these requisites of determination, namely, the conditions that render *Bestimmung* my *vocatio*.<sup>38</sup> Properly, no real *Bestimmung* arises from these two positions. For, neither the individuality nor the normativity required by the concept are fulfilled in these cases. No universal, natural determination can be my determination, because no natural condition speaks to me or addresses me with the force of a norm. But the mere spontaneity of thinking is also not sufficient to determine me and my world with the force that only my determination can have. Only a moral determination can really and actually *determine* me. “Bare pure being that does not concern me and that I would intuit just for the sake of intuition does not exist for me at all; only through its relation to me does anything whatever exist for me. But everywhere only one relation to me is possible, and all other are only subspecies of this one: my *Bestimmung* to act ethically.”<sup>39</sup>

My argument so far should have made clear how the structure of Fichte’s 1800 book depends on the meaning that *Bestimmung* receives as it inherits, but at the same time fundamentally transforms meanings already found in the Enlightenment and Kant. Accordingly, the moral value of the term meets its cosmological significance; while the notion of *Bestimmung* summarizes Fichte’s program of a concrete, individual ethics to counter Kant’s formalism. But why did I suggest viewing the concept of *Bestimmung* so conceived as Fichte’s solution of the problem raised by Kant’s third antinomy? Looking back at the development of the first part of my argument, I want to conclude by addressing this question.

The problematic realm covered by the concept of *Bestimmung*—cosmological and moral—retained and developed by Fichte, as well as the tripartite structure of the book, whose argument leads from the deterministic *impasse* of “Zweifel” and “Wissen” to “Glaube,” already points to a systematic connection with the argument of the Transcendental Dialectic analyzed above. But a further implication of Fichte’s notion of *Bestimmung* becomes relevant here.

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38. For the relationship between the notion of idealism in Book II of the *Bestimmung* and Fichte’s own Jena *Wissenschaftslehre*, see I. Radrizzani, “Die Bestimmung des Menschen: der Wendepunkt zur Spätphilosophie,” *Fichte Studien* 17 (2000): 19–42 and his opposition to Gueroult.

39. SW II, 261.

Fichte's rejection of Kant's dualism of sensibility and understanding leads him to a new view of the subject. This is the winning substitute of the failed notion of a metaphysical soul rejected by the Paralogisms but also of Kant's blocked alternative between an empirical but only cognitively determined "I think" and an utterly indeterminate, hence unknowable "I think." Kant's problem was to prove that the phenomenal subject may still, at least in some respect, be determinable as subject in a noncognitive way, namely, be free agent. But nothing allows Kant to positively claim that for this subject freedom is real. In order to prove the actual freedom of Fichte's new subject—to save it from universal determinism—Kant's transcendental idealism and the notion of a possible absolute spontaneity as causality through freedom is not sufficient. For this only leads to an indeterminate possible free agent, to a will possibly determinable by an alleged practical faculty.

Fichte's claim—or his own solution of the antinomy—is that freedom is immediately demonstrated when the subject's individual *Bestimmung* is brought to the fore: namely, when that unique determination is found which is capable of actually and normatively *determining* the subject as an individual agent in the world. This is the demonstrative task of *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*. It is precisely the rejection of the separation of intuition and concept—which leads to Fichte's notion of intellectual intuition—that ultimately allows him to make of the idea of *Bestimmung* the sole carrier of the functions that for Kant were radically separate, forcing him to consequently separate the issue of freedom's possibility from that of its reality, the notion of a phenomenal "I think" determined by the universal mechanism from an intelligible subject possibly free. Since *Bestimmung*, for Fichte, combines conceptual and intuitive determination, that is, is universally normative, determinately individual, and concrete, the insight into my determination is immediately an insight into the reality of freedom. Herein lies the methodological difference between Kant's claim of freedom's possibility and Fichte's proof of freedom's actuality.

In the Paralogisms, Kant rejects introspection as a privileged access to the reality of the thinking subject, claiming, first, that only the appeal to sensible intuition or to my determination in space and time can constitute me as an object of knowledge; and claiming, second, that the metaphysical assumption of a possible intellectual knowledge of myself would make freedom impossible and determinism unavoidable. In the *Grundlegung*, Kant's diffidence concerning the reliability of introspection is carried a step farther.<sup>40</sup> For Kant, self-cognition does not yield a form of determination of

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40. See the beginning of chapter 2 of the *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten* with the famous notion of the "dear self."

the subject compatible with freedom. For Fichte, by contrast, introspection is the immediate and most legitimate access to the reality, indeed to the determination, of the subject. It is to this access point that he methodologically appeals with the programmatic question: "Who am I and what is my vocation?" My "inner voice" will answer. It is introspection that leads me to an insight into my determination. Methodologically, introspection is the form that intellectual intuition (or the productive imagination as the unity of sensibility and understanding) assumes as it leads me to discover my *Bestimmung*. Thereby, intellectual intuition becomes moral conscience. Introspection discloses a concept that is immediately individual, a concept that is, at the same time, universal and concrete, and is endowed with normative force: this is my determination. Ultimately, Fichte contends not only that my inner voice leads me to my determination but also that "to listen to my inner voice . . . is my only *Bestimmung*, the whole purpose of my existence."<sup>41</sup> The problem of a cognitive determination of the self, which led Kant to split the subject between sensible intuition and intellectual faculty and left the reality of freedom an open question, becomes for Fichte the task of the individual's self-determination carried out by the concrete unity of moral conscience. Thus, while Kant claims that transcendental freedom is possible by showing that we can think of a spontaneity that determines but is not itself determined, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* demonstrates the reality of freedom by showing what my determination is.

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41. SW II, 258.



“There is in nature an  
original thinking power,  
just as there is an original  
formative power.”

On a Claim from Book One  
of *The Vocation of Man*

VIOLETTA L. WAIBEL

Disturbing—this is how Fichte’s readers regarded *The Vocation of Man* at the beginning of the nineteenth century when it was first published in 1800, and disturbing it has remained to this very day. This treatise does too little to enforce the image of the thinker who wrote *The Science of Knowledge*, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and does not do enough to invite readers to discover a different Fichte.

And yet an entire conference is dedicated to this work. Hansjürgen Verweyen rightly points out that none of the titles of the three books of *The Vocation of Man*, “Doubt,” “Knowledge,” and “Faith,” really matches their contents.<sup>1</sup> What kind of doubt, what kind of knowledge, what kind of faith is Fichte talking about?

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1. Hansjürgen Verweyen, Introduction to his edition of J. G. Fichte, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, based on the Fritz Medicus edition revised by Horst Brandt, with an introduction by Hansjürgen Verweyen (Hamburg: Meiner, 2000), XV.

## Introduction

Fichte's treatise *The Vocation of Man* is intended to be a work of popular philosophy—which promises easier access to his *Science of Knowledge* as such. It is more accessible than the *Foundation of the Entire Science of Knowledge* published in 1794–95, and it is more accessible than the *Wissenschaftslehren* of 1804, 1811, 1812, to name just these detailed versions, which Fichte presented to small audiences and which have been handed down and published as lecture notes.

“More accessible than . . .”: this is a comparative judgment, which refers to something to which we compare *The Vocation of Man*. By becoming “more accessible,” the *Science of Knowledge* has not always been well received and has met with harsh criticism and many an additional misunderstanding.<sup>2</sup> A monologue about doubt in the first book, a dialogue about knowledge in the second, and finally a monologue about philosophical faith in the third book. *Doubt* is inspired by Descartes or Pascal or Hume, the dialogue about knowledge by Plato and Socrates, and in the monologue about faith Fichte obviously wanted to follow Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, whom he held in high esteem all his life.

Such a mixture of styles and intellectual approaches raises the suspicion of eclecticism. From the point of view of systems theory it seems flawed, and Fichte seems to have betrayed himself and the *Science of Knowledge*. But this cannot be how Fichte saw it himself. Therefore, we have to ask how we should read the three books of this treatise.

“There is in Nature an original thinking power, just as there is an original formative power.”<sup>3</sup> Fichte's surprising view of the original representational force in nature and the original formative power is, in my opinion, the key to reconstructing the internal unifying factors of the books on doubt, knowledge, and faith, however much these books seem to differ at first sight. Fichte does not reveal these factors himself, and certainly not to a reader who is unfamiliar with the *Science of Knowledge*.

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2. The Editor's Introduction to this treatise in the *Akademieausgabe der Bayerischen Wissenschaften* gives an overview of the wide range of opinions expressed in the reviews of Fichte's treatise. Cf. Fichte GA I/6, 147–82.

3. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *The Vocation of Man* (*Bestimmung des Menschen*, 1800). Quotations taken from the scanned text from Volume I of *The Popular Works of Johann Gottlieb Fichte*, 4th ed., trans. William Smith (London: Trübner & Co., 1889) [VM(PW)], 335 (BM, GA I/6, 200; SW II, 180).

Under the heading *Doubt*, Fichte elaborates the astonishing notion that thinking power, which is said to be an exclusive power of man, is just one of the forces that nature is capable of developing. Nature includes the formative power of plants, the power of motion of animals, and the thinking power of man. However, it is not thinking power alone, but the harmonious interplay of all three forces that constitute man's life force.<sup>4</sup> One might think that Fichte came to these concepts through Schelling's philosophy of nature. According to Fichte's thesis, the special powers of plants, animals, and man, and their respective manifestations, seem to have a common root. It is probable, however, that Fichte was less influenced by Schelling than by Spinoza, because he knew either the *Ethica Ordine Geometrico demonstrata* or Jacobi's interpretation of Spinoza's philosophy in his writing, *Über die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn* (Breslau 1785 and new supplemented edition 1789).

In his third book of *Ethics* "On the Origin and Nature of Emotions," Spinoza introduces the concepts of unconscious drives and of desire which accompanies consciousness. According to Spinoza, drive and desire constitute an identical, all-sustaining life force in rocks, plants, animals, and human beings; this life force only differs according to the state of consciousness and is the manifestation of life as such in all beings.<sup>5</sup> Individual emotions such as pleasure, sorrow, love, hatred, envy, and many others are therefore only manifestations of an increase or decrease of this one basic force of life.

Something similar is obviously the basis of Fichte's procedure when he differentiates the powers of nature only according to their potency and their context in life. A few decades later, in *The World as Will and Representation* (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, 1819/1844), Schopenhauer would refer to the world as "Will," summarizing the forces of nature in one concept that includes human nature and thinking.

It is difficult to determine whether thinking is one of the forces of desire for Spinoza. Nietzsche in any case understands Spinoza in this way—and not without reason—when he writes to Franz Overbeck: "I am really astonished, really delighted! I have a predecessor and what a predecessor!"

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4. Cf. Fichte, *Die Bestimmung des Menschen*, Verweyen ed., 335 (BM, GA I/6, 200; SW II, 180–81).

5. Cf. Baruch de Spinoza, *Ethik in geometrischer Ordnung dargestellt*, trans., ed., and introd. Wolfgang Bartuschat (Hamburg: Meiner Philosophische Bibliothek, 1999), Book III. This is made particularly clear in the first definition of emotions, 336/337–338/339.



I hardly knew Spinoza: that I wanted to read him *now* was an ‘instinctive action.’ Not only is his overall view of things similar to mine—he also considers knowledge the highest of all affections.”<sup>6</sup> If it is true that knowledge is a powerful affection, then it is one of the forces of desire.

Spinoza writes his *Ethics* in the firm, enlightened conviction that the pursuit of knowledge must become enlightened about itself, because human existence is to a large extent powerless against the forces of nature that rule the world, in particular the forces of affective nature, which human beings conceal by presumptuously attributing freedom to themselves. According to Spinoza, knowledge can never directly control the potential chaos of impulses, emotions, and incalculable passions that constantly assail and plague human existence. However, he sees an indirect way to diminish this powerlessness and to transform it into power of activity. Knowledge itself is a desire, an active pleasure increasing the power of acting (*Wirkungsmacht*; *potentia agendi*), caused by the power of thinking.<sup>7</sup>

Systematically close to this one basic polymorphic force in living beings, Fichte had already dealt with the concept of interest as such a fundamental force in his *System of Ethics* in 1798. Called *Grundtrieb* (basic drive) or *Urtrieb* (original drive), this original or basic force is divided into the force of the pure self and that of the empirical self. The formative power of nature is attributed to the lower faculty of desire, whereas the higher

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6. Friedrich Nietzsche to Franz Overbeck on July 30, 1881, *Friedrich Nietzsches sämtliche Briefe. Kritische Studienausgabe in 8 Bänden* (Munich, 2003), Vol. 6, 111. Nietzsche continues his letter with a list of similarities: “there are five main points in this system that are similar to my own. This most abnormal and solitary thinker is closest to me in these things: he denies the freedom of will—; the ends—; the moral world order—; unselfishness—; evil—; even if we differ substantially, these disparities are more due to the differences of our era, culture and science. In summa: my loneliness that frequently, frequently leads to my difficulties in breathing and a loss of blood, as happens on very high mountains, is now at least a kind of togetherness.”

7. In contrast to the active pleasures of thinking, there are the passive pleasures, called passive because they are life-enhancing pleasures stemming from an external source. (Cf. Spinoza, *Ethics* III, Prop. 58 und 59, 330/331–334/335.) The most active form of thinking is knowledge of the third kind, *scientia intuitiva*. It cannot be had without knowledge of the second kind. Its task as adequate knowledge is to investigate the actual causes and to discover the connection between things in man’s physical and mental nature as well as in external nature, which is hidden from perception. This adequate knowledge is not possible without the close observation of inadequate knowledge or sensory perception, which collects the material acquired from experience for further cognitive processing. Spinoza’s second and third kind of knowledge is a quest, a desire for knowledge essentially based on and sustained by the experiential knowledge gained by the first kind of knowledge (Cf. Spinoza, *Ethics* II, Note 2 to Prop. 40, 180/181–182/183 and Prop. 47, 194/195–196/197).

faculty of desire finds expression in the pure activity of the will or the pure drive. In a rational being, the pure drive must take control so that a moral being, on the basis of his entire undivided volition, does what he always should do according to the law of moral freedom.<sup>8</sup> In *The Vocation of Man*, this duality in the life drive of man is transformed into the tripartite system of formative power, the power of motion, and thinking power.

Furthermore, we have to remind ourselves that in the very first public version of the *Wissenschaftslehre*, made available to the wider public when the *Foundation* was published in 1794–95, thinking is also always a practical tendency, to wit, it is directed toward activity and manifests itself in an impulse that is not there described any further. Therefore, it is not too surprising that Fichte equates—maybe we should say seems to equate—thinking to an instinctive power of nature in *The Vocation of Man*.

### Book One: Doubt, or Fichte's Naturalistic View of Man

If we take a closer look, we can see that the theoretical context in *The Vocation of Man* is notably different than that of the *Foundation*. The thinking power is obviously just part of the specific nature of man, an expression of nature:

Thought exists, its existence is absolute and independent; just as the formative power of Nature exists absolutely and independently. It is in Nature; for the thinking being comes into existence and develops himself according to the laws of Nature; therefore thought exists through Nature. There is in Nature an original thinking-power, as there is an original formative-power.

This original thinking-power of the Universe goes forth and develops itself in all possible modes of which it is capable, as the other original forces of Nature go forth and assume all forms possible to them. I, like the plant, am a particular mode or manifestation of the formative-power; like the animal, a particular mode or manifestation of the power of motion; and besides these I am also a particular mode or manifestation of the thinking-power; and the union of these three original powers into

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8. Cf. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Das System der Sittenlehre nach Prinzipien der Wissenschaftslehre* (1798), with an introduction by Hansjürgen Verweyen (editor) (Hamburg: Meiner, 1995), § 11, 140–44.

one,—into one harmonious development,—is the distinguishing characteristic of my species, as it is the distinguishing characteristic of the plant species to be merely a mode or manifestation of the formative-power.<sup>9</sup>

Obviously, thinking is seen as a force that differs from the other formative powers in nature, degree, and content, but not in its quality, whereas as in Fichte's other works he, like Kant, Schelling, or Hegel, does not consider reason, morality, and freedom to be manifestations of natural powers, but rather expressions of an intelligible world, which are therefore posited outside time, making them timeless. Thus, in *The Vocation of Man* there seems to be a radical systemic change compared to the *Wissenschaftslehre*. Furthermore, we have to ask ourselves to what extent Fichte really deals with "doubt," which is the title of the first book. What does it have to do with "doubt" that there is *one* force in nature that manifests itself in plants, animals, and human beings in different forms and degrees of potency? And what kind of doubt is it when he says that "a spirit who could look through the innermost secrets of Nature, would, from knowing one single man, be able distinctly to declare what men had formerly existed, and what men would exist at any future moment;—in one individual he would discern all actual and possible individuals?"<sup>10</sup>

Does Fichte not assert here that there is a determinacy and regularity in knowledge that is beyond all doubt? In these statements Fichte seems to suggest a kind of determinism in the causality of nature, which is what Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi admired in Spinoza. Jacobi judges Spinoza's determinism and the stringent logic of his geometrical method (*Ethica Ordine Geometrico demonstrata*) to be consistent, just as he considers the contents and the method of Spinoza's system to be philosophically inadequate, indeed flawed, because Spinoza—he says—completely misunderstands the real nature of human reason. I do not want to discuss here whether Jacobi's criticism of Spinoza is justified. In any case, Fichte's Book One (Doubt) seems to accept this determinism.

At this point at the latest, one must ask, Who it is that proposes this determinism ending in fatalism? We recall that Fichte explicitly states in his preface that the I who speaks in the book is not the author, is not Fichte himself, but that the author wishes "that the reader should himself

9. VM(PW), 335/336; BM, GA I/6, 200; SW II, 180/181.

10. VM(PW), 338; BM, GA I/6, 201; SW II, 182.

assume this character.”<sup>11</sup> The I who speaks invites the reader to identify with it. But why—we have to ask again—should the author of the *Wissenschaftslehre* want his readers to adopt a position that clearly contradicts many central points of Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*?

One central point of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is discussed in the following passage concerning human freedom: “I am, indeed, conscious of myself as an independent, and, in many phases of my life, a free being; but this consciousness may easily be explained on the principles already laid down, and may be thoroughly reconciled with the conclusions which have been drawn.”<sup>12</sup> In view of the closed determinism in nature, the obvious question arises whether it can be reconciled with human freedom. The sobering conclusion of the I, of the speaker, is however that the I feels itself to be free even while thinking demonstrates that freedom is not compatible with the natural order presented here.<sup>13</sup>

Yet thinking means that nature as it is and as it is effective is doubled in the being that does the thinking, because the thinking I mirrors nature in its concepts. The I feels free in its power to form these concepts, but in fact it is only an imitation of the originally existing natural force. This shows that it is not some spirit that sees through nature, but it is the thinking individual who reconstructs and doubles nature in his concepts.<sup>14</sup>

In the *System of Ethics*, Fichte considers this imitating power of concepts a first stage of selfhood and freedom, which find their active expression in thinking. In contrast, in *The Vocation of Man* the speaking I in its monologue advances the thesis that the apparent freedom articulated in the concept is subordinate to the natural force it imitates. The concept can do nothing but imitate the power created by the formative natural force of what exists. Yet there is not only one I, there are many imitating instances of consciousness that recognize each other as I; *thou* and are therefore distinct from each other. The sum of all this is that “[t]his consciousness of all individuals taken together, constitutes the complete consciousness of the universe; and there is no other, for only in the individual is there definite completeness and reality.”<sup>15</sup>

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11. VM(PW), 321; BM, GA I/6, 189; SW II, 168.

12. VM(PW), 338; BM, GA I/6, 202; SW II, 183.

13. VM(PW), 339; BM, GA I/6, 203; SW II, 184.

14. VM(PW), 337/338, 342; BM, GA I/6, 201; SW II, 182/183; GA I/6, 205; SW II, 187.

15. VM(PW), 342; BM, GA I/6, 205; SW II, 187.

Within this system, as Fichte's speaker calls it with a certain aloofness, we can even consider and classify the will as a power of nature: "In this system also, the phenomenon of our consciousness which we call Will, becomes thoroughly intelligible. A volition is the immediate consciousness of the activity of any of the powers of Nature within us. The immediate consciousness of an effort of these powers which has not yet become a reality because it is hemmed in by opposing powers, is, in consciousness, inclination or desire;—the struggle of contending powers is irresolution;—the victory of one is the determination of the Will."<sup>16</sup> Volition as intentional, directed action, as striving to set its own goals and planning their realization is classified in the *System of Ethics* in 1798 as the second level of articulation of human freedom. But in Book One of *The Vocation of Man* volition is seen as a higher manifestation of the power of nature, which at times is experienced as unconscious desire, at times as a conscious, undecided urge torn apart by contending forces, and at other times as firm volition. As the monologue continues, it becomes clear that these higher natural powers of desire and volition effective in man recognize vice and virtue, repentance and conscience, reward and punishment. But at this point Fichte has the speaker of the monologue introduce a limitation: "The ideas of guilt and accountability have no meaning but in external legislation. He only has incurred guilt, and must render an account of his crime, who compels society to employ artificial external force in order to restrain in him the activity of those impulses which are injurious to the general welfare."<sup>17</sup>

If we do not want to insinuate that this is inconsistent with what Fichte presented in his *Wissenschaftslehre*, then we have to ask what kind of strategy he is pursuing with this openly empiricist approach.

### Johann Heinrich Jacobi's Treatise on Freedom

What the speaker asserts in the first book of Fichte's *Vocation of Man* is clearly related to the theses Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi proposed in his treatise "*Ueber die Freyheit des Menschen*" (On Human Freedom), which he included in the preface to the Spinoza letters to Mendelssohn *Briefe über die Lehre des Spinoza an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn* in 1789, and which refers to Spinoza's theory of the affects and to both the life-advancing and use-

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16. VM(PW), 343; BM, GA I/6, 205; SW II, 187.

17. VM(PW), 344; BM, GA I/6, 206; SW II, 189.

ful and the limiting and detrimental nature of human emotions,<sup>18</sup> Jacobi's treatise is particularly interesting for the reception and promulgation of Spinoza's theory of drives. Fichte certainly knew it.<sup>19</sup> It consists of two parts: "*Der Mensch hat keine Freyheit*" (sections I–XXIII) (*Man Has no Freedom*) and "*Der Mensch hat Freyheit*" (sections XXIV–LII) (*Man Has Freedom*).

Following Spinoza, Jacobi argues in the first part of the treatise on freedom for the thesis that "Man has no freedom" (I–XXIII), but in several instances he also advances his own arguments in support of this negative thesis. The behaviour of nature's creatures and thus of man, which is guided by emotions, is based on the mechanism of desire and revulsion. The general desire that is at the basis of all impulses is considered by Jacobi to be an a priori instinct with the drive of self-preservation being the most fundamental a priori drive of all (VI). In the case of reasonable beings, this drive is directed toward a personal existence that is characterized by concepts and will.

Jacobi sees desire as the most important drive leading human beings to act. But if it is true that desire, and thus the drive of self-preservation, is the main motivational force of human existence, then it is also true that man is not free in his actions. Therefore the proposition "Man has no freedom" is correct. If we inquire into the moral value of the actions that are motivated in this way, then we can see that desire can either be in harmony or not in harmony with the rational laws of life. If man's desires and impulses follow the rational laws of nature, then his actions are good and reasonable; otherwise they are against the reasonable laws of nature and therefore bad. Acting in this way means contributing to one's personal self-preservation. But it also means following the mechanical laws of one's desires, impulses, and self-preservation. This mechanism and its rationality, however, are grounded on pure chance.

From this point of view, will and concept formation follow the mechanisms of the natural order. A reasonable and moral order as demanded by Kant on the basis of apodictic principles can obviously also be realized

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18. The "Treatise on Freedom" ("*Ueber die Freyheit des Menschen*") is part of the preface of Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *Ueber die Lehre des Spinoza in Briefen an den Herrn Moses Mendelssohn* (Breslau: Löwe, 1789), XXVI–XLVIII and LII sections (Roman section numbers are given in the text).

19. Fichte used a letter written on September 29, 1794, by Wilhelm von Humboldt to introduce himself to Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (Fichte's letter was enclosed with Humboldt's letter to Jacobi; cf. GA III/2, 202). Time and again Fichte confirmed that he had read Jacobi's works intensely, in particular in his letter from OBmannstädt of August 30, 1795 (cf. GA III/2, 391–93).

through the natural order. This has nothing to do with freedom in its strictest sense. Still, Jacobi assumes that a person feels love for himself and others, which leads one to develop at least a rudimentary feeling for justice. The love of the person can be in conflict with the love of the individual who wants and has to want to preserve himself. Jacobi obviously associates being a person with what Rousseau calls *amour de soi*, that is, a reasonable and healthy self-love, whereas the concept “individual” coincides with Rousseau’s *amour propre*, an egoistical instinct of self-preservation.<sup>20</sup>

In the second part of his treatise, Jacobi advances theses to support his own claim that “Man has freedom” (XXIV–LII). For Jacobi, the existence of persons is co-existence, which means being with others. We cannot imagine an absolutely independent existence, but neither can we imagine a completely dependent, merely passive existence. It is inconceivable that existence is purely mechanical, which means that all actions must be based on self-activity (XXV). This pure self-activity can be called freedom (XXX). Only man is conscious to a degree that allows him to use this self-activity fruitfully for his actions. Therefore, freedom does not consist in the unfounded independence of decisions or in the rationality of desires, but in the independence of the will from desire (XXXII). Will shows the degree of rationality of consciousness.

If a decision is made not simply on the basis of what is stronger but according to what is right, then a person leaves the mechanism of mere mediation behind and enters the realm of possible immediacy. This is the realm of honor, of respect for others, of freedom, of free volition, and ultimately of the unconditioned or of God. Honor and its negative opposite, a feeling of shame and self-contempt, are, according to Jacobi, indispensable signs of freedom. Jacobi clearly refers to Spinoza when he suggests that a completely rational being is not able to lie or to betray. The free will demands its right by liberating itself from desires or rather from conflicting desires so as to explore the realm of possible actions and to reach a suitable decision.

Jacobi sees a higher intelligence in the spirit of freedom, which means he sees the presence of God, whom he associates with a feeling of pure love.

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20. Jean Jacques Rousseau distinguishes between *amour de soi* (healthy self-love) and *amour propre* (selfishness). Cf. Jean Jacques Rousseau, *Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes* (1755), in *Discours sur les sciences et les arts. Discours sur l'origine et les fondements de l'inégalité parmi les hommes*, chronologie et introduction par Jacques Roger (Paris: Flammarion, 1971), 196n., where Rousseau explains the fundamental difference between *amour propre* and *amour de soi*.

He maintains that Socrates lived this spirit of pure love. This feeling, this impulse of true love cannot be deduced from any syllogism or mechanism. Jacobi writes in section XLIX: "The sensual impulse or the principle of desire is directed towards the finite; the intellectual impulse, the principle of pure love is directed towards the eternal."<sup>21</sup>

Jacobi in this two-part treatise seems to follow formally the topics that Kant deals with under the heading "Antinomy of Freedom." If we take a closer look, however, we can see that Jacobi develops the pros and cons of freedom quite independently, even if he is clearly inspired by Spinoza's theory of affects.

It seems obvious to me that Fichte puts the "I," whom the reader of the first book on doubt is asked to identify with, in the same position that a friend of Spinoza's teachings who has been influenced by Jacobi might advance. Toward the end of the first book this position culminates in an aporia:

Which of these two opinions shall I adopt? Am I free and independent?—or am I nothing in myself, and merely the manifestation of a foreign power? It is clear to me that neither of the two doctrines is sufficiently supported. For the first, there is no other recommendation than its mere conceivableness; for the latter, I extend a principle, which is perfectly true in its own place, beyond its proper and natural application. If intelligence is merely the manifestation of a power of Nature, then I do quite right to extend this principle to it; but, whether it is so or not, is the very question at issue, and this question I must solve by deduction from other premises, not by a one-sided answer assumed at the very commencement of the inquiry, from which I again deduce that only which I myself have previously placed in it. In short, it would seem that neither of the two opinions can be established by argument.<sup>22</sup>

The doubt that gives the entire book its name obviously is the doubt that stems from the attempt to think in terms of a consistent naturalism, of the kind that a philosophically unprepared reader might assume and that Jacobi seeks in Spinoza. The I of the monologue, to whom the power of

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21. Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *Über die Lehre des Spinoza*, 1789, XLVI.

22. VM(PW), 351; BM, GA I/6, 211–12; SW II, 195.



thinking appears to be a free self-activity, is not satisfied with the insight that freedom and self-determination are only an illusion. Therefore, this I declares: "The system of freedom satisfies my heart; the opposite system destroys and annihilates it. To stand, cold and unmoved, amid the current of events, a passive mirror of fugitive and passing phenomena,—this existence is insupportable to me; I scorn and detest it."<sup>23</sup> This turbulent feeling of an unbearable situation, of the formative power of nature, if you like, necessitates further inquiry.

### A Final Brief View on the Three Books of *The Vocation of Man*

We find in the second book of *The Vocation of Man* a discussion of knowledge inspired by the Socratic dialogues. It cannot be explained here how this discussion leads to a strict, solipsistic idealism that cannot provide any compelling reason to assume the existence of an external world. Knowledge is convinced that all of its ideas exist only in the mind, even the ideas about the ideas about things in the external world. So this idealism destroys itself, as does the strictly empiricistic naturalism in the first book. Knowledge too leads to disquiet and drives one to further research which goes beyond knowledge. The thinking power strives to attain the kind of inner peace that goes beyond knowledge and comes from a more profound insight.

The third book finally presents the faith that unites the two aspects Jacobi discussed in his Spinoza letters and in his work on *David Hume über den Glauben oder Idealismus und Realismus* (*David Hume on Belief or Idealism and Realism. A Dialogue*).<sup>24</sup> Descartes and Hume each embraced a kind of "belief" that is supposed to overcome doubt about the existence of an external world, albeit on basis of different arguments, inasmuch as the existence of such a world can obviously be experienced empirically, even if it cannot be proved by means of concepts. Fichte discusses belief in the existence of things in the external world as early as 1794–95 in his *Foundation*. In this work too he constructed a kind of consciousness that absorbs impulses and sensory data only because of an undefined impetus,

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23. VM(PW), 351; BM, GA I/6, 212; SW II, 196.

24. Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *David Hume über den Glauben oder Idealismus und Realismus. Ein Gespräch* (Breslau 1787).

the origin of which it is unable to clarify. It is only in the general practical part of the *Wissenschaftslehre* that this consciousness, which is active in itself, opens up toward the outer world by means of striving and longing, and finally by means of belief based on feeling. "Here lies the ground of all reality. As we have now demonstrated, it is only through the relation of feeling to the I that the reality of either the I or the not-I is possible for the I. Anything that is possible only through its *relation to a feeling*, without the I being conscious or able to being conscious *of its intuition of this feely*, and *which therefore appears to be felt, is believed.*"<sup>25</sup> Conviction concerning the existence of an external world is not grounded on knowledge, but on feeling. We cannot know or prove the existence of things, but we can feel and believe it.

In the *Vocation of Man*, this epistemologically justified belief, which we find in different modifications in Descartes, Hume, and Jacobi, is supplemented by a belief or faith in God, which Jacobi had already associated with the belief in the external world and which Fichte now develops in his own deliberations. Jacobi consciously exploits the homonymy of the German *Glauben* with the English "belief" and "faith," in one case directed toward objects of the external world, and in the other toward God. Fichte is trying to justify Jacobi's homonymy in his deliberations.<sup>26</sup> Whether he succeeds in this is a matter that I must here leave unresolved.

Translation by Susanne Costa

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25. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre als Handschrift für seine Zuhörer*. GA I/2, 429; SW I, 301.

26. For a further discussion of this topic see Günter Zöller, " 'Das Element aller Gewissheit' — Jacobi, Kant, und Fichte über den Glauben," *Fichte-Studien* 14 (1998): 21–41. See too Reinhard Lauth, "Fichtes Verhältnis zu Jacobi unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Rolle Friedrich Schlegels in dieser Sache," in *Transzendente Entwicklungslinien von Descartes bis zu Marx und Dostojewski* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1989), 266–96. Concerning the relationship of Fichte and Jacobi after 1800, see Erich Fuchs, "Texte zu Jacobi und Fichte im Brinkman-Archiv, Trolle Kjungby, Schweden," *Fichte-Studien* 1 (1990): 205–27.



*Erkenntnis and Interesse*  
 Schelling's System of Transcendental Idealism  
 and Fichte's Vocation of Man

MICHAEL VATER

Rarely have notable workers in philosophy and in literary theory interacted so intensely as in the period of German letters that spanned the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century. The case of Johann Fichte and Friedrich Schelling is especially interesting, since each of them imagined they were working to solidify a common position that was the systematic fruit of all of Kant's labors on transcendental idealism, and yet they struggled, in almost Oedipal fashion, for leadership of the movement. One can look to the *Fichte-Schelling Correspondence* for the personal details of the fraught relationship, but to answer the serious philosophical question of the "one difference" that separates the two thinkers, one had best look to the texts the two thinkers published or penned in the years 1800–02: Fichte's *Vocation of Man* along with new versions of the *Wissenschaftslehre* attempted in 1800 and 1801–02 and Schelling's *System of Transcendental Idealism* along with two pieces published in his *Zeitschrift für speculative Physik*, the *General Deduction of the Dynamic Process* and the *Presentation of My System*. This chapter will focus

on the *System of Transcendental Idealism*<sup>1</sup> and the *Vocation of Man*,<sup>2</sup> with occasional reference to the points of conflict that emerge between the two thinkers in the *Correspondence*.<sup>3</sup> As the title indicates, the works contrast broadly as essays in systematic philosophy based in theory of knowledge (or the Kantian theoretical philosophy) and in practical philosophy (or Kantian “metaphysics of morals”).

We shall argue that Fichte’s project of illuminating the stance of human agency and his frank appeal to the immediacy of individual selfhood is *currently* philosophically more compelling than the systematization of human cognition that Schelling achieves in abstraction from the lived subjectivity of the individual human agent, partly in casting purposes ahead of herself, partly in obedience to the moral “summons” symbolized by the presence of other embodied agents.

Fichte’s departure from Jena in June 1799 in the wake of the “Atheism Controversy” disrupted the forces of transcendental idealism which for a decade had been concentrated in that small university town,<sup>4</sup> and after Jacobi publicly denounced the *Wissenschaftslehre* as nihilism<sup>5</sup> and Kant publicly disavowed its connection with transcendental idealism,<sup>6</sup> plans with various publishers that involved both the idealist philosophers and the thinker-critics of the romantic circle were quickly hatched. Critical philoso-

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1. Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling, *Historisch-Kritische Ausgabe, Werke* 9, 1, *System des transscendentalen Idealismus* (1800), hg. Harald Korte and Paul Ziche (Stuttgart: Frommann Holzboog, 2005); cited hereafter as *Sl*. F. W. J. Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism*, trans. Peter Heath, intro. Michael Vater (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1978); cited hereafter as *Tr*.

2. Johann Gottlieb Fichte, *Bestimmung des Menschen*, in J. G. Fichte, *Gesamtausgabe I/6, Werke 1799–1800*, hg. Reinhard Lauth and Hans Gliwitzky (Stuttgart- Bad Cannstatt: Friedrich Frommann Verlag, 1981; cited hereafter as *BM*. Johann Fichte, *The Vocation of Man*, trans. Peter Preuss (Indianapolis-Cambridge: Hackett, 1987); cited hereafter as *VM*.

3. *Fichte-Schelling Briefwechsel*, ed. Walter Schulz (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1968); cited hereafter as *FSB*; J. G. Fichte/F. W. J. *Correspondence*, in *The Philosophical Rupture between Fichte and Schelling*, trans. Michael G. Vater and David W. Wood (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2012); cited hereafter as *PRFS*.

4. For accounts of the controversy, see Daniel Breazeale, *EPW*, 40–45 and Yolanda D. Estes, “Johann Gottlieb Fichte,” in *The History of the Western Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Graham Oppy and Nick Trakakis, vol. 4 (Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 24–26, 29–30.

5. See Jacobi to Fichte 1799 in Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi, *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel*, Allwill, trans. George di Giovanni (Montreal and Kingston: McGill University Press, 1995), 500, 512, 519.

6. See Wayne M. Martin, “Nothing More or Less than Logic: General Logic, Transcendental Philosophy, and Kant’s Repudiation of Fichte’s *Wissenschaftslehre*,” *Topoi* 22, no. 1: 29–39.

phy needed to show a united face and catch the edge of the cultural currents swirling in the times just before the turn of the century. A bewildering variety of these plans are documented in the letters that passed between Fichte in Berlin and Schelling in Jena in 1800, as well as political schemes (and personal affronts) over who was to lead the new institute and who was to review new developments in the sciences and the arts.

But the *Fichte-Schelling Correspondence* broaches difficult philosophical tensions as well, hidden under the courtesies of exchanging copies of publications and asking for opinions of newly published works. Schelling ordered his publisher to send Fichte a vellum copy of the *System of Transcendental Idealism* when it was published in the spring of 1800, but it did not arrive until November 15 (FSB, 105; Tr. 42). Four days later, Schelling received a copy of *The Vocation of Man* (FSB, 113; Tr. 47). Fichte made a few pages of notes on Schelling's system<sup>7</sup> and began to get quite actively engaged in a debate with its author on the place of a philosophy of nature within idealism. Schelling does not explicitly refer to the *Vocation* for a nearly a year, and then his sole remark on the essay is to disparage the way it ultimately relocated the ground of consciousness beyond the reach of philosophy, in the realm of *faith*: there is simply no room for faith in philosophy (FSB, 135; Tr. 61). The polite exchange of copies, otherwise the sign of friendship, really was the drawing of battle lines: one version of idealism could not see there was much for idealism to do with nature—except to move away from it; another found no sense in locating the topic of discussion far beyond what theoretical intellect could make of the deliverances of the sense.

### Faith, Interest, and the “Intellectual World”

Because Fichte's disavows any systematic or “scientific” intent for *The Vocation of Man* and hopes to work from the standpoint of natural consciousness in a personal and rhetorical way, it is difficult to discern the three-part structure of the argument before it unfolds and to precisely locate the new terminology of “faith,” “interest,” and the “supernatural” (*überirdische*) or “intellectual” world.

Let us first consider the terminology of the third book. Fichte's argument moves within a broad context of phenomena that we can together call *interest*. In the most basic cases, biologically embedded human needs such as hunger, hydration, human company, shelter against the elements, and

7. “Bei der Lectüre von Schellings tr. *Idealismus*,” GA, II/5, 413–15, translated in PRFS 119–20.

security against predators (animal or human) are best met, not dismissed skeptically. Hunger commands, and the same can be said for social needs such as the rearing of children and the protection of the infirm and aged. Fichte's argument moves freely among these affectively announced imperatives, and the fluidity of such reference reminds the reader that human action has the structure of *bidding* or command.

Confronted with the problem of skepticism's challenge to the validity of the "natural urge" to take one's presentations as caused by external objects to which they refer, Fichte argues that it is not an arbitrary decision whether to treat one's feeling and presentations as merely one's states of consciousness or whether to accord them a reality—even if theoretical philosophy (epistemology) is totally unable to provide a satisfactory account of the presumed causal link between "outside" and "inside." Because one is primarily an actor or an agent embedded in a situation, the standpoint of ordinary consciousness inclines toward a "practical realism": "If we all have the ability and urge to go beyond our first natural view, then why do so few go beyond it . . . ? It is not reasons, for there are none that can do it. Rather it is their *interest* in a reality they want to produce—the good person simply to produce it; the common sensuous person to enjoy it" (VM, 73; BM, 258–59).

The standpoint of activity is native to human consciousness—and my word *native* implies that in one sense it is found, or comes along with the situated or intentional aspect of consciousness, and in another sense that, once consciousness has been socially developed or educated, it is voluntarily adopted and exercised both for its own sake and for the consequences that action brings. Natural—by which Fichte means practical, not theoretical—consciousness is *interested* or inclined. It is driven by natural urges and finds itself confronted with concepts that are not mere pictures, but which prompt an independent activity that realizes them. Interest begets purposes and human consciousness is naturally purposive, thinks Fichte. This urge to realize one's purposes through action points to an ultimate situation where consciousness becomes independent, self-active and self-realizing. This urge, which is felt or experienced, not conceived, connects *me* to a represented situation which is the aim or goal of my activity. "I think this real power to act, but I do not *think it up*. The immediate feeling of my drive to independent activity is behind this thought. Thought does nothing more than represent this feeling and take it up into its own form, the form of thought" (VM, 69; BM, 255).

The familiar stance of deontological ethics: *Ought* implies *can*, points to the wider situation of human agency. That I am impelled by a natural

drive, inclined by a personal or social goal, and inspired or commanded by an ideal somehow beyond my immediate well-being implies there is a natural bridge between *interest*, *faith*, and the mobilization of specific activity or *will*. "No one who is alive can part with this interest nor with the faith which this interest brings with it. We are all born in faith. Whoever is blind in this regard will blindly follow its secret and irresistible prompting. Whoever can see will follow with open eyes, and will believe because he wants to believe" (VM, 73; BM, 259).

The third book of the discussion introduces *faith* as the antithesis of the disheartenment and doubt produced by the skeptical probing of first realistic, then idealistic constructs of epistemology.<sup>8</sup> So a first sense of "faith" is the renewed sense of self and the validity of action that the switch from the theoretical to the practical stance effects. "[I]t is not these [empty images of things supposedly existing outside ourselves] but the necessary belief in our freedom and strength, in the reality of our acting . . . that justifies all consciousness of a reality existing outside of us—a consciousness which itself is only a faith since it is based on faith, but a faith that necessarily follows from consciousness" (VM, 79; BM, 264). A second sense of 'faith' is belief in the efficacy of rational action creating not only a better, but a utopian world: "[T]hat purpose has got to be achieved. Oh, it is achievable *in life* and *through life*, for reason commands me *to live*. It is achievable, for—I am" (VM, 91; BM, 276).

Only in the third and fourth sections of the third book does "faith" take on any connotation of a belief that is not *directly* supported by reason. The third part deploys a transcendental argument, based on the Kantian presupposition that purposive behavior or agency is not the mere production of worldly consequences, but aims at efficacy in a purely rational order—or the cultivation of will for sake of will. Impulse, interest, and purpose are all gradations of rational activity that culminate in *morality*,

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8. The suggestion that *Glaube* (belief, faith) would constitute the appropriate title and theme for his refutation of skepticism and philosophy of action may have come from Jacobi's 1799 attack upon him, which reprimanded Fichte for giving the impression that philosophy could be theistic instead of nihilistic: "So why did Fichte give philosophy the reputation that it *wants*, and *can* be theist? . . . It would not be any reproach to Transcendental Philosophy that it does not know anything about God, for it is universally acknowledged that God cannot be *known*, but only *believed in*. A God who could be *known* would be no God at all. But a *merely artificial* faith in Him in so far as it *only wants to be artificial*—i.e. simply scientific or *purely rational*—abolishes *natural faith*, and with that, itself as faith as well; hence theism is abolished as a whole" (Jacobi, 500). "Natural faith" is the key to understanding Fichte's argument.



or obedience to the command of reason. On this point, we note that the Kantian cannot refute a utilitarian or neo-Darwinian understanding of morality; the parties can only disagree. But if the Kantian presupposition is granted, then Fichte can argue

1. that obedient (lawful) willing is commanded of me for its own sake,
2. that this demand is the source of everything rational in me, in particular my freedom, and
3. therefore, it is reasonable to believe in a supersensible, eternal world, where the impulse to improve and perfect my existence is realized, rather than frustrated (VM, 101; BM, 286–97).

Belief in the efficacy of my will is “faith,” but hardly a Jacobian *salto mortale*—or an invitation to believe twenty-three incredible things before breakfast, as one Anglican divine famously said. It is a natural belief based on arguable premises.

The fourth part of the discussion, however, moves beyond the Kantian religion of morality Fichte previously espoused in his 1798 *On the Basis of Our Belief in a Divine Governance of the World*, where he argued from the premise: “I myself, along with my necessary goal, constitute what is supersensible” (SW V, 181; IWL, 147), to a terminological, and effectively nontheistic, if not atheistic, identification of God with the moral order: “The living and efficaciously acting moral order is itself God. We require no other God, nor can we grasp another” (SW V, 186; IWL, 131). In 1800, evidently another God is required, even if that principle is not quite conceivable. Fichte now speaks of an “infinite will” that is the union and mediation of all finite wills, that perceives each finite will, and of a “God” that is “the union and direct interaction of a number of autonomous independent wills with each other” (VM, 107–109; BM, 293). This union of wills is an open secret that lies before us in this present life, asserts Fichte; it does lie before us, unnoticed as Fichte claims, if what is meant is the interaction of diverse agents or the making-way for one another that is demanded by morality (and to some extent fulfilled in the social and legal realms). The involvement of a divine agency is not so plainly discernible.

Fichte goes on to ascribe the conventional predicate of “creator” to this infinite will, but this deity creates monadologically, “in the only way it can be and in which alone a creation is required: *in finite reason*” (VM,

110; BM, 296). This remark is cryptic as it stands; in the *Correspondence*, Fichte speaks more technically of the principle of *the intellectual world* as

an inconceivable real ground of the separation of individuals and the ideal link of all of them = God. (This is what I call the intelligible world.) This final synthesis is the highest. If you wish to give the name “being,” indeed absolute being, to whatever still remains impenetrable to this view, then God is pure being. Notwithstanding, in itself this being is not some kind of compression, but it is absolute agility, pure transparency, light, but not the light that reflects from bodies. It is only the latter for finite reason: it is accordingly only a *being* for finite reason, not in itself (FSB, 129; PRFS 57).<sup>9</sup>

Fichte works out this line of speculation at some length in the 1801–02 *Wissenschaftslehre*.<sup>10</sup> It is, however, only of such speculations as are found in the fourth section of the final book of *Vocation* that Schelling’s complaint, voiced late in the *Correspondence*, could apply, to wit, that it relocates the ground of knowing beyond knowing (which ought to be an embarrassment for *Wissenschaftslehre* or “Science of Knowing”), that there is as little place for “faith” in philosophy as there is in geometry, and that this whole line of speculation considerably alters Fichte’s whole philosophy, which previously had simply identified “God” and the moral order (FSB, 135; PRFS 61).

We are now in a position to approach the question of the overall structure of *The Vocation of Man*. I have approached the work backward, starting with the resolution of the dialectical perplexities in Book Three in order to avoid unnecessary entanglement in the discouraging and/or skeptical epistemological investigations of the first two books—a strategy that parallels informed attempts to read Fichte’s *Grundlage des gesamten Wissenschaftslehre*.

At some distance from the text, it is possible to identify Fichte’s interlocutors or “targets” in the first two sections.

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9. Fichte to Schelling, 31 May 1801. On December 27 of the previous year, Fichte mentions that he had touched on these matters in the third book of the *Vocation of Man*, and that his view is the very antithesis of Schelling’s, which make finite intelligence only a higher potency of nature (FSB, 116; PRFS 49).

10. See Michael G. Vater, “The *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1801–1802,” in *Fichte: Historical Context—Contemporary Controversies*, ed. Daniel Breazeale and Tom Rockmore (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1994), 191–210.

It is fairly easy to see that the target of Book One, with its realistic account of knowledge that highlights the principle of causality and which ends by undermining any authentic sense of freedom, is an idealized Spinoza. When the analysis of sensation, thought, and action ends in an overwhelming causal determinism coming from the outside, as it were, the writer laments: "I don't act at all, but nature acts in me. I cannot will the intention of making something of myself other than what I am determined to be by nature, for I don't make myself at all, but nature makes me and whatever I become" (VM, 19; BM, 207). This is perhaps a reprise of the crushing sarcasm of the Earth Spirit's reply to Faust's *übermenschlich* pretensions in the opening scene of Goethe's *Faust, Part I*.<sup>11</sup> Or perhaps it is a reflection of Fichte's worries about the direction of Schelling's *Naturphilosophie* that get expressed repeatedly in the *Correspondence*.

A second attempt is made in the first book to overcome the paralysis of determinism by hypothetically elaborating a "system of freedom," where the wishes of the heart—"I want to love. I want to lose myself in taking an interest [*Theilnahme*], I want to be glad and be sad. For me the highest object of this interest [*Theilnahme*] is myself" (VM, 24; BM, 212)—are skeptically undercut again by the suspicion that this love and "interest" (or self-absorption), so vividly experienced, is but itself a product of the forces of nature. Unless affect, urge, and drive are connected to a standpoint where genuine independence and self-activity are achieved (the moral stance of Book Three), passion and interest itself is subject to Spinozistic causal dissection as the "miserable worm's" self-deception.

The target of Book Two is more mysterious. Fichte clearly presents a transcendental analysis of cognition, but lacking the anchor of "the primacy of the practical" that Kant added to his Transcendental Idealism, idealistic epistemology transform the contents of consciousness into the

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11. See I, scene 1, ll. 486–98, especially,

Wo bist du, Faust, der Stimme mir erklang,  
Der sich an mich mit allen Kräfte drang?  
Bist du es, der von meinen Hauch erwittert,  
In allen Lebenstiefen zittert,  
Ein furchtsam weggekrümmter Wurm?

(Reprinted in Goethe's *Faust*, trans. Walter Kaufman (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1963), 102. "Where are you, Faust, whose voice rang out to me, / And forced itself upon me with all its strength? / Is it you who at my slightest breath/ Trembles to the depths of your very life/ A fearful crumpled twisted worm?" Translation mine.)

stuff of dreams—the line of argument deployed against idealism by later anti-Kantians such as Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Wittgenstein, but used in different form in Fichte's lifetime against *Wissenschaftslehre* by Reinhold, Schelling, and Hegel: the charge that *Wissenschaftslehre* is mere logic, not philosophy.<sup>12</sup>

There are three phases of the idealistic analysis of cognition presented in Book Two. In the first phase, an inspection of consciousness is seen to reveal an essential togetherness of self-consciousness and the object of consciousness, but since there is no sensation or object of consciousness without self-consciousness, the latter is judged to be condition of the former. The object is given in self-consciousness, but there is no consciousness of the production of the object (VM, 40–41; BM, 228–29). Secondly, in the natural stance of theoretical consciousness, the object of consciousness is imputed to the workings of an external object upon consciousness, with the connection between the two furnished by the principle of causality. But external objects can never be observed in their “externality,” nor is causality directly experienced. Both the supposedly external object and the linking causal relation are *thought*, and what one is conscious of is not the so-called external object, but the positing of an object according to an inner law of thought (VM, 45; BM, 233). The mere theoretical idealist concludes, then, that all knowledge is knowledge of oneself alone. Finally, the externality of the imputed object is explained through intuition—a projection of an internal state outward or an out-seeing that is accompanied by self-consciousness or in-seeing (VM, 51; BM, 238). The object is produced in consciousness unconsciously or without consciousness of its production through a threefold process of *intuition*, which places the object in one's consciousness as outside of consciousness, *thought*, which imputes a causal relationship between “outside” and “inside,” and a third stage of *synthesis*, which hides the above-mentioned two mechanisms (VM, 56–57; BM, 244–45). That this march of thought is summarized as: *the consciousness of the thing outside of us is absolutely nothing more than the product of our own presentative capacity* (VM, 59; BM, 236), leads me to conclude that Reinhold is object of Fichte's concern in this second book. But closer to our

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12. In a letter to Fichte of 19 November, 1800, Schelling says: “But the *Wissenschaftslehre* (in just the pure form as has been advanced by you) is not yet philosophy itself; what is valuable about the former is exactly what you say, if I understand you correctly, that it proceeds entirely in pure logic and has nothing to do with reality. It is, as far as I understand it, the formal proof of idealism, and hence science κατ' ἐξοχήν. What I want to call philosophy, however, is the *material* proof of idealism” (FSB, 108; PRFS 44).

concerns here is the similarity of this analysis to the dialectic of hidden or unconscious production, projection, and eventual entry-into-consciousness that is the motor of Schelling's genetic deduction in the *System of Transcendental Idealism*. It lends weight to Fichte's charge, repeated often to Schelling in the *Correspondence* (and to others outside of the presumed perimeter of confidentiality that the letters adopted) that Schelling never understood transcendental idealism.<sup>13</sup>

### The Odyssey of Consciousness

When Schelling turned from his explorations of the possibility of an idealistic philosophy of nature in the years 1797 to 1799 and attempted a grand work of consolidation, he actually believed that philosophy had two independent parts, transcendental philosophy and natural philosophy, each of which functioned adequately on its own, but together calling for the unification of a "grand theory." The first thing Fichte notices when he reads the 1800 *System of Transcendental Idealism*, arguably Schelling's most polished piece of reasoning, is that its two major parts do not fit together or, much worse, that unification of nature and consciousness is achieved solely on naturalistic grounds: "His classification of philosophy into two *fundamental sciences*.—I assert: nature as object is only *thought* by you: it only exists to the extent that you *think* it."<sup>14</sup> Fichte has good reason to be worried, for the public perceived the two philosophers to hold a roughly common position, and the frankly abstractive, conceptual methodology of the system, articulated with little reference to the I's standpoint of agility, self-activity or self-constitution—now cryptically referred to by Fichte as a *Grundreflex*—ignored the most fundamental aspect of *Wissenschaftslehre*, that I know when I know, and thus tended to perpetuate the fundamental misreading of transcendental idealism that the provisional 1794–95 *Grundlage des gesammten Wissenschaftslehre* seemed to invite, namely, that it was all about some ghostly disembodied absolute I that subsisted outside personal consciousness. Argues Fichte (in his personal notes): "If we only

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13. Fichte wrote to a former student, Jean Baptiste Schad (1758–1834), on December 29, 1801, that Schelling had never understood him. Schad sent the letter to Schelling. See FSB, 254–56/PRFS 74–75, Schelling's last letter to Fichte.

14. "Bei der Lectüre von Schellings tr. Idealismus," GA II/5, 413 (cited hereafter as LS); PRFS 119.

knew (about objects) without *knowing* in turn that we *know* them, then transcendental idealism would not be possible at all. And (knowingly) this standpoint is the standpoint of the philosophy of nature; *unknowingly*, it is the standpoint of dogmatism.”<sup>15</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to fully explore the *System of Transcendental Idealism*; our discussion will be limited to: (1) its starting point and methodology; (2) the way it embeds the genetic account of intelligence in the stages of nature’s development; and (3) the way its only approach to an account of “spirit” or embodied consciousness is an objectified one, painted on the large canvases of social philosophy, philosophy of history, and aesthetic creation—rather than the miniature frames Fichte preferred of personal morality, life in the historically given state, and religion.<sup>16</sup>

(1) The most striking feature of Schelling’s method in the *System* is its abstract and Reinholdian cast. Schelling’s knowledge of *Wissenschaftslehre* was limited to its first, quasi-foundational presentation in the 1794–95 *Grundlage*, and to the rather wooden analysis of presentation or the basic item of consciousness as a synthesis of opposite, a subjective and an objective element. That I know when I know, that I am given to myself in self-consciousness, and the presentation is originated in my consciousness are features that are absent in Schelling’s analysis, or at best underappreciated. While for Fichte in the second Jena system, “intellectual intuition” means that the I can at least symbolically access the constitutive or active I in reverting upon itself, “intellectual intuition” is for Schelling from the very start a mysterious process of abstracting from lived subjectivity and only thereby gaining access to the I on its productive or constitutive level.

At the natural level, self-consciousness is analogous to the eye: “Self-consciousness is the lamp of the whole system of knowledge, but it casts its light ahead only, not behind” (*SI*, 47; *Tr.*, 18). Unable to see itself unless it alters the natural situation, the philosopher arbitrarily contrives to get self-consciousness to produce itself, in laboratory conditions as it were, and in this experiment the I becomes an object for itself in the act of producing itself. This implies that

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15. Ibid.

16. For a fuller account, see this author’s Introduction to Schelling, *System of Transcendental Idealism* (1800), trans. Peter Heath (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1978), xi–xxxvii.

1. the I is originally an object only for itself, and
2. in becoming an object for us, it become what it originally is not, viz., something objective, and
3. therefore, its self-production in transcendental philosophy essentially involves a self-limitation (SI, 70–71; Tr., 36).

To limit itself, the I must oppose something to itself, and this opens up a series of dialectical moves whereby the I appears to itself (and the philosopher-experimenters in attendance) as finite in its infinitude, objective in its subjectivity, limited in its limitlessness, and so forth. Having induced that which is absolutely nonobjective to become objective, self-consciousness enters into a permanent duality of acting and intuiting, or producing and reflecting. “Through this constant double activity of producing and intuiting, something is to become an object, which is *otherwise not reflected by anything at all*” (SI, 41; Tr., 13). In its limited and genetically exhibited form, the I seems to be in perpetual duplicity, first a producing, then a subsequent intuiting; this is the price one must pay for having the essentially nonobjective projected onto the objective, or that which is essentially self-intuition (or intellectual intuition) become visible to finite subjects. But the in-itself character of the I, that it is free and self-originating, is that it is intellectual intuition (SI, 58–59; Tr., 27); only the whole series of finite forms of consciousness, produced in the incessant shuffling from production to intuition in a specific form, then back to production again, approximates the I in itself. The I is essentially not a thing, but philosophy performs the trick of turning it into a thing by generating the series of all possible kinds of things, all possible forms of objectivity.

(2) The elaboration of the philosophy of nature is the *System*’s most ingenious and most technical feature, for the lopsided dialectical back and forth between productivity and product (intuition) enables Schelling to parallel the deduction of the phases of intelligence with the articulation of the successive levels (*Potenzen*) of nature. Schelling’s most illuminating comments about the relationship between transcendental idealism and the philosophy of nature can be found in the latter half of the 1800 *General Deduction of the Dynamic Process*. A basic point that needs to be appreciated by post-Darwinian readers is that nature traverses the ladder of its successive stages *speculatively*, or in philosophical reflection, not actually or historically, and the same holds for the corresponding phases of intelligence. All phases of nature coexist simultaneously, as do all moments of intelligence—sensation or qualities, intuition, and the various forms of under-

standing.<sup>17</sup> Both the major parts of transcendental idealism, philosophy of nature and transcendental philosopher proper, are exercises in Platonic *anamnesis*, as it were—philosophical recoveries or “recollections” of the *ideas* of nature and intelligence. The one philosophizing finds his or her self-consciousness already existing in the highest potency, but a flatfooted idealism that straightaway makes reason the sole intention of nature is mistaken in this anthropomorphic line of thought, for it is only in putting aside subjectivity and learning to think objectively or purely theoretically that the philosopher can effect this philosophical recovery—just as in done in the *System of Transcendental Idealism* (DP, § 63, 164). In this process, however, the so-called dead nature of Newtonian physics disappears, and nature’s observed qualities are seen to be sensations, its “matters” or corporeal bodies intuitions, and organic nature as itself intelligence (DP, § 63, 164–65).

There are three general phases or epochs in the *System*’s construction of nature-or-intelligence: (1) from original sensation to productive intuition, (2) from productive intuition to reflection, and (3) from reflection to the act of will. The first epoch is emblematic of the whole deduction. The I limits itself or objectifies itself in order to appear in consciousness; its self-construction is, *for the observer*, a transition to duality, from pure subject to subject-and-object (SI, 93; Tr., 51). This happens by means of the I’s positing a limitation, which limitation, however, since it is a spontaneous act of the I, is the establishment of a boundary that is not a boundary, or an activity on both sides of the boundary. The I appears to itself as limited or determined in sensation, which in reality is nothing but the sensing itself. “Now if the I always senses only its own suspended activity, the sensed is nothing distinct from the I, a fact to which ordinary philosophical parlance has already given expression, in that it speaks of the sensed as something purely subjective” (SI, 98; Tr., 56).<sup>18</sup> The I does not just have sensations, however, but has sensations *of* bodies or things. This occurs because its intuition (sensation) is accompanied by an intuition of intuition; the sensation becomes the matter of “productive intuition,” and the I’s object becomes matter (SI, 121; Tr., 72). This productive activity,

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17. *Allgemeine Deduktion des dynamischen Prozesses* § 30, in *Zeitschrift für speculative Physik*, Bd. 1, n. 2, hg. Manfred Durner (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 2001), 113; cited hereafter as DP.

18. Translation altered, for Schelling speaks of the I in the nominative case (*das Ich*), not the accusative. On Fichte and Schelling’s line of thought, the I is originally and always active and subjective; only in self-limited forms does it appear to itself as an objectified “self.”



in turn, appears to the I as two activities, one imaging and one producing; their union or synthesis, that which appears to consciousness, is the awareness of matter and mind: "In the first epoch of self-consciousness we could distinguish three acts, and these seem to reappear in the three forces of matter and in the three stages of its construction. These . . . give us three dimensions of matter, and these latter, three levels in the dynamic process [gravity, magnetism, and electricity]" (SI, 146; Tr., 90). The two subsequent epochs of theoretical philosophy have a more idealistic cast, the second being the elaboration of the forms of thought (Kant's categories), and the third the forms of relation (schematism) and judgment. Theoretical philosophy culminates in the uncovering of "transcendental abstraction," the activity whereby space, time, the putative relations of substance and causality that link discrete bodies, and so forth, are all separated out in experience and become capable of philosophical (transcendental) analysis for the philosopher who observes the process of evolution that empirical abstraction has facilitated (SI, 223; Tr., 149–50). By the same token, the freedom of transcendental abstraction allows those observing consciousness to transit to the order of practical reason or will, where the active character of the original I first becomes apparent to itself.

(3) Because Schelling believed that intellectual intuition, both in the original I and in the philosopher-observer recovering its activity in philosophical reflection, involves surrender of subjectivity or moving to an impersonal point of view, the *System's* practical philosophy takes an objective (or collective) approach to the life of the mind and largely leaves the individual agent behind. In this, it prefigures Schelling's so-called system of identity and Hegel's "objective idealism." The author warns the reader at the start that what is at issue in this section is not a peculiar moral philosophy commended to any singular agent, but a transcendental reflection on the thinkability of moral concepts as such, conducted at the highest level of generality (SI, 230; Tr., 155).

The practical point of view entails an "absolute abstraction" from the previous series of acts and the phenomena they produced, for while theoretical consciousness is always involved with objectivity and necessarily takes the shape of subject-objectivity, practical consciousness or will demands pure self-determination—activity that is only involved with objectivity to the extent that future or not-yet-existent states are conceived which the will strives to realize. That I can act at all (here Schelling is quite in concurrence with Fichte) means that I am not necessitated to act in any specific way by any worldly state or situation, or that, to some extent, I am free to act as I choose or will. In theoretical philosophy, the I's productivity remained hidden from itself; it could intuit itself as *produced*, as an organic

body, for instance, but the I could never there achieve self-intuition. Only in *willing* is the I raised to a higher power and enabled to intuit its essential activity (SI, 231–32; Tr., 156). Thus, the autonomy that Kant places at the summit of *moral* philosophy is seen to be the principle of all transcendental idealism (SI, 233; Tr., 157).

From these, its opening moves, it is easy to see how the practical part of the *System of Transcendental Idealism* unfolds, namely, along familiar Kantian and Fichtean lines that prize the autonomy of the individual inside a context of plural agents mutually respecting one another's freedom, the drift of history to replace hegemony and the tyranny of traditionally favored individuals, genders, and ethnicities with egalitarian or cosmopolitan societies, and the fostering of intellectual disciplines where teleological ideas or forecasts lead the progress of science, not just masses of contingencies and discrete observations. Schelling introduces a novel point in making the exercise of will the I's entry into time, the moment of absolute abstraction, or the separation of inner sense from outer; only when the I acts is it for itself, and only when it is for itself in a situation of ever-changing and lapsing actuality is it called upon to act concretely (SI, 231; Tr., 155–56). He follows Fichte's social and legal philosophy of the late Jena years in making the confrontation of my will with the wills of other embodied subjects in a social-legal setting the real factual "check" that individualizes my consciousness and concretely locates a sphere of activity for me here and now. The Other is the limit of my freedom not only in a general or moral sense; the pressure of other wills determines my situation and in fact individualizes my activity; unless I were hemmed in by other wills, my sphere of activity would be infinite and embrace all possibility. Only the specific situation of other agents acting against my will gives my will a specific object (SI, 244–45; Tr., 166).

The real novelty of the 1800 *System* comes in its final section, where the absolute self-activity of the practical stance is merged with the blind productivity of the theoretical in a consideration of aesthetic creativity and the way the produced work of art displays an infinity of meaning. Presumably, Schelling benefited from discussions with the Jena romantics in this regard, although the general outline of his treatment is inherited from Kant. What is new and surprising in Schelling's treatment is the emphasis on the *work*, not the creator's intent or state of mind. If one considers the artist's freedom, then every work of art is the one absolute work, for the work indefinitely conveys endless meanings and thus succeeds in doing what nature cannot do—displaying the infinite activity of the I (SI, 327; Tr., 231). This is a fruitful, almost contemporary approach to aesthetics, since it frees artistic creativity from any fetters of conventional or traditional forms, makes utterly no judgments about how nature and its

stuff is imbued with human meaning in a particular work or form of art, and points to an essential feature that differentiates the aesthetic work from the utilitarian or “craft” object—a surplus of meaning due to an overtermination of the determinate (in Schelling’s language, a display of the infinite within the finite). In the work of art, the absolute activity of the practical perspective is merged with the productive-but-hidden character of theoretical or object-producing consciousness, and the whole aspect of productivity is concretized for intuition—a necessarily polyvalent intuition wherein many subjects will sense and understand many different things. Art is the display of nature’s I:

What we speak of as nature is a poem lying pent in a mysterious and wonderful script. Yet the riddle could reveal itself, were we to recognize in it the odyssey of the spirit, which, marvelously deluded, seeks itself and in seeking flies from itself; for through the world of sense there glimmers—as if through words, the meaning—as if through dissolving mists the land of phantasy for which we search. (SI, 328; Tr., 232)<sup>19</sup>

### The Difference—If Not the Primacy—of the Practical

The exchange of texts—our major texts—between Schelling and Fichte in November 1800 did not settle matters between the two. The *Correspondence* goes on for another fourteen months with neither author quite able to pinpoint the “one difference” that separates the two, and when the exchange breaks off, the works each writes in 1802 continue to reflect the abortive private negotiations the letters contained. In *Bruno*, Schelling echoes the judgment of his new colleague Hegel that Fichte’s idealism is essentially trapped inside the subjective perspective and hence *unable* to attain the broader standpoint of absolute (or “objective”) idealism.<sup>20</sup> Fichte’s *Darstel-*

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19. Translation altered.

20. See F. W. J. Schelling, *Sämmtliche Werke* IV, 256–57, 303 ff.; *Bruno, or On the Natural and Divine Principle of Things*, trans. Michael Vater (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1984), 157, 199ff. Compare with Hegel’s: “The system [Fichte’s] itself is a consistent product of the work of the intellect, a mass of finitudes which the original identity cannot draw together into the focus of totality and or to its absolute self-intuition. The Subject-Object, therefore, turns itself into a subjective Subject-Object and it does not succeed in suspending this subjectivity and positing itself objectively” (G. W. F. Hegel, *The Difference between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy* (1801), trans. H. S. Harris and Walter Cerf [Albany: State University of New York Press, 1977], 155).

lung des Wissenschaftslehre (1801–02) not only expands the “infinite will” of the *Vocation of Man* or the “pure being” of the letters into a “system of the intelligible world,” it contains an extensive critique of Schelling’s new system of identity that insists that philosophy must begin in freedom to end with freedom, something no “new Spinozism” or treatment that begins with mere being can achieve.<sup>21</sup> The perplexity Fichte encountered when he read the *System of Transcendental Idealism* persists: “Am I more correct in saying what *I* say, or is *he* in saying what *he* says? Will we ever comprehend each other?” (LS, 414; PRFS 120).

On several scores, the contest between Fichte and Schelling must be scored a draw: Each achieves, to a remarkable degree, the ideal of a philosophical system that comprehends at least some of the more important phenomena of human existence; the fact that Fichte’s ends with a philosophical theology and Schelling’s with an objectivistic (product-based) philosophy of art only underlines the difference of their starting points. Furthermore, each reasons according to a defensible philosophical methodology—Fichte insisting, “No freedom [at the top], no ethics [in the end]” (SW II, 150), Schelling that the philosopher must abstract from subjectivity and adopt an impersonal or objective stance to attain the absolute.

In other respects, Fichte’s line of reasoning is superior to Schelling’s: he fully engages with the *philosophical currents of modernity*, from Descartes’s universal doubt to Reinhold’s *Elementary Philosophy*, and is willing to get a consistent system of transcendental idealism from Kant’s writings by subordinating his reading of the first and third *Critiques* to the “primacy of the practical” announced in the second; Schelling, who can be credited with being no mere child of his time, is in some way *not* a “modern,” for he is quite willing to read Plato through the lens of Kant and Kant through the eyes of Plato. It is to Fichte’s advantage that the *Vocation* advances its moral theology in the light of an essentially *skeptical* critique of the prospects of any defensible theory of cognition, whether realistic (Spinoza) or critical (Kant/Reinhold). Further, the *immediacy* of the moral or agent perspective that Fichte adopts and its resistance to being explained or explained away, give him a prima facie advantage—I can act if I think I can act, but if I am hobbled by a Rube Goldberg account of cognition (Kant’s first critique) or neo-Darwinian explanation of the ethical, I will have to wonder if I can act when I *want* to act.

Who or what is to decide the issue? As recently as Wilfred Sellars’s “Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man,” the problem was deemed

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21. SW II, 130–50.

insoluble—there is simply no deciding *between* the cognitive stance (secured in and by empirical science) and the manifest image (the human as actor and bearer of social and moral responsibility).<sup>22</sup> Yet technology proceeds on the inverse maxim of morality: if the latter announces, “*Ought* implies *can*,” the former is guided by “*Can* implies *ought*.” If in fact technologies of neurological or genetic intervention succeed in realizing the clumsy totalitarian goal of *reeducating* political and social “deviants” to “correct views” and social conformity, what is to prevent the practical perspective from atrophying and losing its self-claimed unique status in the human person as the sole determiner of “good” acts or acceptable behavior. Perhaps this is but a fanciful flight to an as yet unrealized and wholly unrealizable future, but if we are *in the long run* biologically and ecologically crafted to succeed (continue) rather than to sprout the Kantian “holy will,” what will happen when the “moral compass” becomes a museum piece like the astrolabe or magnetic compass? Though I am personally horrified at the prospect of having to surrender my driver’s license because of failing eyesight, faulty judgment, and generally slowed synaptic response, the day of governance by microchip is at hand. At this writing, automobiles are being readied for the market that depend on circuitry and global positioning systems to transport all of us far more safely and efficiently than the confluence of individual agents’ fallible but “free” decisions—now seen to result sometimes in five-day traffic jams.

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22. Wilfred Sellars, *Science, Perception, and Reality* (New York: Humanities Press, 1968), 1–37. It should be noted that Sellars concludes his essay with a one-paragraph expression of the hope that a more advanced scientific perspective that deals with the human’s whole central nervous system as the foundation for scientific (theoretical) analyses of cognition and agency alike will succeed in resolving the contradiction between humans’ scientific self-image and the “manifest image.”

# *Faith and Knowledge and Vocation of Man*

## A Comparison Between Hegel and Fichte

MARCO IVALDO

Hegel and Fichte belong to the group of thinkers who create organic and original philosophical systems. The exercise of delving deep into their philosophies, as well as the points of disagreement between them, is a highly fruitful one for philosophical research. My aim in this chapter is to contribute to deepening our understanding of Fichte's *Vocation of Man* (1800) by comparing it with Hegel's *Faith and Knowledge* (1802). Such a comparison is opportune, as Hegel declares his desire in *Faith and Knowledge* to take into consideration "preferably" or "above all"<sup>1</sup> the *Vocation of Man* in order to illustrate and judge Fichte's point of view. If, in *The Difference Between the Philosophic Systems of Fichte and Schelling* (1801), Hegel had recognized—in spite of his critique of Fichte—that the philosophy of the latter was "a genuine product of speculation"<sup>2</sup> because it grasped the identity of the

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1. "vorzüglich." *Glauben und Wissen oder Reflexionsphilosophie der Subjektivität in der Vollständigkeit ihrer Formen als Kantische, Jacobische und Fichtesche Philosophie* (GW), in "Kritisches Journal der Philosophie," hrsgs. F. W. J. Schelling und G. W. F. Hegel, I, 2 (Tübingen: Cottasche Buchhandlung, 1802); now in G. W. F. Hegel, *Werke II: Jenaer Schriften 1801–1807* (HW) (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986), 404.

2. *Differenz des Fichte'schen und Schelling'schen Systems der Philosophie in Beziehung auf Reinhold's Beyträge zur leichtern Übersicht des Zustandes der Philosophie zu Anfang des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts* (Jena: Seidler, 1801); in HW II, 115: "echtes Produkt der Spekulation."

subject and object in intellectual intuition, in *Faith and Knowledge* Hegel decisively accuses Fichte's philosophy of being a void and formal thought. Is this verdict of Hegel just? What is the fundamental theme that lies at the heart of the *Vocation of Man*? Is Fichte's philosophy—as presented in this work—really “overcome” (*aufgehoben*) by Hegel's philosophy? For the purpose of discussing these questions, I will pursue my reflections in three directions: (I) I will reconstruct the judgement Hegel advances in *Faith and Knowledge* on the *Vocation of Man*; (II) I will take into consideration some fundamental topics of this work of Fichte; (III) I will conclude with some consideration of the fundamental alternative represented by the philosophies of Fichte and Hegel that is already manifested in these two works.

## I

In *Faith and Knowledge*, Hegel maintains that the so-called “philosophies of reflection of subjectivity”<sup>3</sup>—Kant, Jacobi, Fichte—are the result of a specific “dialectic of Enlightenment” (*Aufklärung*). With the Enlightenment, philosophical reason asserts its “absolute autonomy”<sup>4</sup> in the face of religion, but it is really victorious only in an extrinsic and apparent way. In fact, after the struggle against faith, reason of the Enlightenment (*aufklärend*)—which, according to Hegel, is shown to be incapable of comprehending the substantial content of religion—turns its gaze on itself, and enters, so to speak, a reflective period. Now, the outcome of this reflective movement of reason is: (1) that reason (*Vernunft*) is reduced to mere understanding (*Verstand*); and (2) that reason itself posits its proper substantial content as a “beyond all,” in “a faith outside and above itself.”<sup>5</sup> Such a process of self-alienation took place—according to *Faith and Knowledge*—in the philosophies of Kant, Jacobi, and Fichte. These could be considered the rejection by reason of its existence in the Absolute (*ihr Sein im Absoluten*) as the highest peak of philosophy. For Kant, Jacobi and Fichte, the Absolute is “above reason,”<sup>6</sup> which can refill its void, its being nothing (*Negativität*), only through aspiration and a subjective presentiment.<sup>7</sup> From this critique

3. “Reflexionsphilosophie[n] der Subjektivität” (GW, HW II, 287).

4. Ibid.: “absolute Autonomie.”

5. Ibid., 288: “als ein Jenseits in einem Glauben außer und über sich.”

6. Ibid.: “über die Vernunft.”

7. Ibid., 289: “mit der Subjektivität des Sehens und Ahnens.”

of Hegel against the philosophies of the Enlightenment, we gather that for him, a true philosophical system can only be founded on the identity of reason with the Absolute, which in its turn must be thought of—this had already emerged in his work *The Difference Between the Philosophical Systems of Fichte and Schelling* (1801)—as the identity and the indifference of the subjective and the objective.

In particular, Fichte represents, according to Hegel, a point of view that sums up those of Kant and Jacobi. Fichte's philosophy synthesizes—or rather, attempts to do so—the subjective aspiration of Jacobi and the formal objectivity of Kant, but—Hegel observes—“without these two opposed forms being consumed in a real identity and indifference.”<sup>8</sup> In this way, the *Vocation of Man* can be labeled a “formal idealism of faith.”<sup>9</sup> Let us see how.

1. Fichte's system of knowledge is a knowing of a completely empty knowing, to which an empirical reality is absolutely opposed. Between these two poles there exists only knowledge of their relative identity. But this means, in Hegel's view, that there is no effective knowledge of their real identity as indifference. This explains the first part of the aforementioned definition: Fichte's idealism is a “formal idealism.”
2. To this mere relative identity another identity is opposed in the *Vocation of Man*, which presumably represents the true identity. In other words, an absolute “beyond all” affirmed in faith. Hence, the complex characterization of the thought of the *Vocation of Man* as a “formal idealism of faith.”

This critique of Hegel also includes the way in which the integration of reality and ideality in the *Vocation of Man* occurs. In “theoretical idealism”<sup>10</sup>—Hegel refers here to the second book of the *Vocation of Man*—knowledge is presented as a pure construction of logical forms that turns any content into abstraction. This gives rise to a contrast between two types of abstraction: on one hand, the abstraction of the infiniteness of pure thinking, and on the other, the abstraction of the finiteness of the

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8. Ibid., 393–94: “nicht daß die beiden entgegengesetzten Formen sich in einer wahrhaften Identität und Indifferenz auslöschen.”

9. Ibid., 415: “formaler Idealismus des Glaubens.”

10. Ibid., 412 and 413: “theoretischer Idealismus,” “praktischer Idealismus.”



purely empirical. The integration of reality with ideality could come into “practical idealism” through faith—Hegel refers here to the third book of the *Vocation of Man*—which transforms, or purports to transform, the absence of reality of theoretical abstraction into practical completeness. However, according to Hegel, even this completeness remains formal. In fact, faith only expresses the demand for identity, and is not itself the identity. In “the formal idealism of faith,” the ideal and real are originally conceived as absolutely opposite. In other words, they are not originally mediated in indifference. Moreover, the transition from abstract reasoning to reality occurs in faith only in the form of a demand. It is not possible to speak of a true identity or integration between the real and the ideal.

In the eyes of Hegel, this absence of integration has ruinous effects both on the philosophy of nature and on the theory of right and ethics, and finally on the philosophy of religion. As to the first, Fichte bases his theory of nature on a “vulgar teleological principle,”<sup>11</sup> according to which nature is nothing in itself, but can exist only in relation to another. In the theory of right, an unmediated opposition between the concrete living individual and the universal law is introduced, so that “individuality is subjected to tyranny.”<sup>12</sup> In morality (*Sittlichkeit*), an insurmountable opposition is manifested between the pure will and the empirical multiplicity of duties, with the result that the emptiness of the sentiment of duty and the content of each duty thwart each other continuously and fail to reach a synthetic position. Concerning religion, “religion,” as intended by Hegel in *Faith and Knowledge*, represents “an eternal redemption” already “real and present”<sup>13</sup>—that is realized in the coincidence of the divine unity of the universe in which all finitude is mediated in the identity and indifference from the very beginning—whereas the “formal idealism of faith” in the *Vocation of Man* conceives the redemption only as a “beyond” that is never reached and thus is constantly pushed on to the infinite. However, there seems ultimately to exist a basic opposition between religion, as thought by Hegel in *Faith and Knowledge*, and the philosophy of absolute subjectivity developed in the *Vocation of Man*.

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11. Ibid., 419: “gemeines teleologisches Prinzip.”

12. Ibid., 425: “die Individualität befindet sich unter absoluter Tyrannei.”

13. Ibid., 423: “ewige . . . wahrhaft reale und vorhandene Erlösung.”

## II

Let us now consider the *Vocation of Man*. First of all, it is necessary to specify the systematic position of this work in Fichte's thought. It is not a scientific exposition of the doctrine of science. Rather, it illustrates, as Reinhard Lauth has asserted, "the vision of the world"<sup>14</sup> that derives from it. It contains a meditation on the sense of existence that favors the assumption of a practical position coherent with the orientations of a philosophy of freedom. Here emerges a characteristic feature of the Fichtean conception of philosophy. Philosophy is not just a scientific system. It must also be applied to life, and its philosophical application (*Anwendung*) mediates between the principles and the *praxis* of life. Moreover, as Fichte's "popular" works show, a rhetorical dimension is part of the application of philosophy to life. This commitment is to draw attention, to communicate, and to win the consent of an audience broader than the scientific one, to urge a practical stand. The *Vocation of Man* can also be interpreted as a major essay in rhetoric, of which Fichte retrieves the specific value besides "logic," that is, a scientific and systematic treatment.

As we know, Fichte illustrates in the first book of this work a dialectic of doubt that combines a methodological and an existential aspect. Doubt is directed against the opinions thought to be simply obvious, which then undergo suspension (*epoché*). This suspension of opinions is engendered by the need for true knowledge that can only be reached through an accurate and rigorous examination of the issues. Thus, doubt is *methodos*, a journey of liberation from prejudice in order to reach knowledge—a Cartesian topic. By calling into question all knowledge about ourselves and the world that is admitted without critical examination, two conflicting visions of the vocation of the self emerge. According to the "thought" (a thought of the deterministic kind!), the self is just a link in the chain of manifestations of nature, in which every existing thing is determined according to an absolute (deterministic) necessity. However, the requirements of the "heart"—an important theme of Pascal and Jacobi—are opposed to this, for which the self wants self-determination and freedom of action. "Heart" *versus* "thought" (= determinism); liberty *versus* necessity. The final result of doubt is that the self is exposed to an unsustainable laceration, "to an

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14. Reinhard Lauth, *Hegels Fehlverständnis der Wissenschaftslehre in „Glauben und Wissen*, "Revue de Métaphysique et de Morale 88 (1983): 22.

unbearable condition of uncertainty and indecision.”<sup>15</sup> The final result of doubt (*Zweifel*) is ultimately despair (*Verzweiflung*).

Now, it is extremely interesting that Fichte does not suggest a “*salto mortale*” in faith for overcoming doubt. Fichte inserts a mediation between doubt and faith. He emphasizes the specific self-comprehension of knowledge in order to solve—from a superior point of view—the opposition between thought and heart, which concludes the dialectic of doubt. Fichte’s (transcendental) philosophy is reflexive comprehension of the essence of knowledge. It is the ontology of knowledge. The second book of the *Vocation of Man* offers an essay on this sort of ontology, the boundaries of which, however, must be clear. The goal of the second book (*Knowledge*) is only to set the self free from the determinist vision of the universe. To this effect, he carries out a critique of representation. What the second book misses is the theory of the practical constitution of the object along with fundamental features of its theoretical constitution, for example, the doctrine of imagination (we must search such for theories in Fichte’s contemporary scientific statements of the doctrine of science). The second book is a partial treatment of knowledge (*Wissen*) and we must be aware that in the *Vocation of Man* a wider and more concrete comprehension of knowledge will only emerge with the practical and moral knowledge developed in the third book.

The main result of the critique of representation can be expressed this way: the content of representation is not at all the thing in itself (*Ding an sich*), of which consciousness would be a product or reflection. Rather, it is just the thing as (*als*) it is represented. The thing is precisely an objectification that can be realized thanks to intentional acts of pure consciousness in relation to something that resists (*Hemmung*). Thus, if determinism pretends to explain the self as a simple effect, a pure product of a system of things, of “nature,” the critique of representative knowledge shows that the “things” are not “things in themselves” (*Dingen an sich*) at all, but rather “formations” (*Bildungen*) of original consciousness in relation with a resistance, which emerges as such in the realization of consciousness. The refutation of determinism as illustrated in the book on *Doubt* is ultimately carried out through transcendental critique of the dogmatism of the “thing in itself.”

Given that determinism is refuted, free will and autonomy are ultimately possible. However, is this will real as well as possible? Now, Fichte

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15. *Die Bestimmung des Menschen* (BM), in GA I/6, 214: “Unerträglicher Zustand der Unge-  
wissenheit, und der Unentschlossenheit.”

maintains like Kant that *theoretical* reasoning cannot give an answer to this question; he claims that it can only provide a theory that recognizes the determinant role of the *practical factor* in the constitution of experience. In fact, the critique of representative knowledge takes the thing back to its image in consciousness, but it does not (yet) say anything about the reference of the image to the reality of which the image is an image. This silence about objective reference is the price paid for freeing the self from the dogmatic subjugation to the things in themselves. However, the price is rather high. At the end of the critique of representation, the image turns out to be *only* an image, stripped of all objective references. This absence of objectivity is mirrored in the self that realizes that it cannot assert reality, not even that of itself.

So Fichte takes into consideration—and, surprisingly, also shares—the charge of nihilism against the doctrine of science that Jacobi comes up with in the *Letter to Fichte* (1799). He acknowledges that the critique of representation has dissolved the things in themselves, but it does not yet lead to any access to reality. With the refutation of the thing in itself, a world of shadows seems to substitute for the real world, which appears to be reduced to nothing. Fichte acknowledges that Jacobi is correct about this. However, he adds that the philosopher must not be afraid of this nihilist moment at all. He must overcome it with the help of a thought that goes to the heart of the issue. “The path to reality,” Fichte stated in Königsberg in 1807, “passes only through the feared nihilism.”<sup>16</sup>

This path to reality is based in transcendental philosophy on the idea that the self-realization of reflection is at the same time its self-limitation. This leads reflection, thanks to the antinomial dialectic of self-realization and self-limitation, to what it is *not*: the real of knowledge. Now, how is the real of knowledge conceived in the *Vocation of Man*? In the third book (“*Glaube*”), the answer is searched for in the destination/vocation of man, in other words, through shifting the theoretical thought toward the practical one. “Your destination,” says Fichte, “is not pure knowledge but acting according to this knowledge. . . . This voice leads me out of the representation, out of pure knowledge, towards something that goes beyond it and is completely contrary to it.”<sup>17</sup> Since all that happens in

16. *Wissenschaftslehre*, Königsberg, GA II/10, 137: “Nur durch den gefürchteten Nihilismus hindurch geht der Weg zur Realität.”

17. BM, GA I/6, 253: “Nicht bloßes Wissen, sondern nach deinem Wissen Thun ist deine Bestimmung. . . . Diese Stimme führet mich ja aus der Vorstellung, aus dem bloßen Wissen heraus auf etwas außer demselben Liegendes, und ihm öllig Entgegengesetztes.”

the reflected consciousness already exists in a state of drive (*Trieb*), this practical consciousness that leads beyond the representative image is based on a drive to autonomy which is inseparably linked to the consciousness of ourselves and reveals itself as a feeling.

The self consists of a drive to freedom that is revealed as a feeling. This feeling is immediate consciousness, or an original self-donation of reality to the self and for the self. But how is it possible to maintain that this feeling is endowed with objective certainty? Fichte's response can be illustrated in three ways:

1. The objective certainty of the feeling cannot be assured by any sort of logical-deductive knowledge. In fact, the latter takes its departure from some grounds, and so presupposes those grounds. Fichte has examined the structure of logical-deductive knowledge in the third principle of *Foundations of the Entire Doctrine of Science*, and has shown that it leads to the absolute *self-positing* of the first principle. So, the original consciousness we discuss here must be a consciousness that presupposes oneself (*sich selbst*), not knowledge of a logical-deductive sort.
2. This consciousness claims validity. It wants to affirm something positively and it wants such affirmation to be immune to any suspicion of fallacy. In other words, its intentionality is theoretical and practical at the same time. It wants reality and affirmation of what it asserts.
3. Fichte calls the act of the real self that expresses this very consciousness *Glaube* (Belief/Faith). It is characterized as "the voluntary perseverance in the vision that is presented in a natural way."<sup>18</sup> From this passage we can see that *Glaube* is connected to the will. It is a positing of the will. As such, it enjoys a practical essence: it is the assent to what is given through the feeling of the drive to autonomy. *Glaube* is never separated from knowledge, more precisely, from a judgement and motivations. In fact, Fichte says that *Glaube* is attributed to a vision of our destination "because only through this

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18. Ibid., 257: "*freiwillig[s] Beruhen bei der sich uns natürlich darbietenden Ansicht.*"

vision can we fulfil our own destination.”<sup>19</sup> Therefore, this type of knowledge is practical, a type of knowledge that has to do not with the state of things, but with the sense of existence instead.

Hegel reprimands faith in the *Vocation of Man* as being “entirely formal”<sup>20</sup> to the extent that it was the pure subjective need of the identity of ideality and reality. However, the truth is quite different. Hegel seems to miss the core of Fichte’s theory of *Glaube*. He overlooks the fact that faith is the assent and the reflection of the fundamental drive of the self that brings to light the sense of existence. *Glaube* is not a demand, but rather a practical and theoretical conviction. It is the reasonable and voluntary assent to the “voice” of feeling, which in turn is the immediate manifestation of the drive to freedom.

Also, a large part of the third book of the *Vocation of Man* is represented by the development of the contents of such a conviction. In other words, it is represented by the knowledge that *Glaube* mediates as an appropriate vision of the destination of man. I cannot give an analytical treatment of this now, but I would like to draw attention to only one fact that refutes Hegel’s opinion that “the formal idealism of faith” is characterized by the emptiness of the contents to which is only left “the vain declamation of fulfilling the law for the sake of law and the duty for the sake of duty.”<sup>21</sup> Fichte establishes an organic relationship between the moral destination, the action, and the positing of an aim. The moral destination needs action, and action is immediately connected to the positing of a certain “being in the future,”<sup>22</sup> or better still, to the project of a goal according to the laws of thinking. Fichte thinks that the goal does not determine the contents of the ethical imperative. It is the other way round: the content of the imperative determines the goal. In this case, Fichte is close to the Kantian conception of goals that “are goals and duties at the same time,” as in the *Metaphysics of Morals*.<sup>23</sup> A complex and practical teleology emerges from the reflection on the contents of the moral imperative. First of all, a “being in

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19. Ibid.: “weil wir nur bei dieser Ansicht unsere Bestimmung erfüllen können.”

20. GW, HW II, 415: “ein durchaus Formales.”

21. Ibid., 416: “Nichts als die hohle Deklamation, daß das Gesetz um des Gesetzes willen, die Pflicht um der Pflicht willen erfüllt werden müsse.”

22. BM, GA I/6, 265: “ein in der Zukunft liegendes Seyn.”

23. Immanuel Kant, *Metaphysik der Sitten*, AA, VI, 362 ff.

the future” is developed from the consciousness of duty (*Sollen*). This being in the future is a world, “another and a better”<sup>24</sup> world with respect to the one that already exists. At the same time, the ethical imperative provides us with the conviction that the perspective of “another and a better world” is not a simple subjective demand, but has a foundation. In other words, a *reasonable* practical faith (*Glaube*) is conveyed in the realization of a goal through the ethical imperative. This is the type of faith that stems from moral consciousness and presses for concrete action in view of the political and spiritual destination of man.

### III

We have only had a partial representation of the *Vocation of Man* so far. However, I hope I have managed to convey the complexity and vastness of the perspectives this work outlines. We find in it the silhouette of a transcendental ontology of human existence, along with the comprehension of a human being according to a dialectic of freedom set between the conditionality of *our* knowledge and action, and the unconditionality of meaning. The expositions of the doctrine of science following the *Vocation of Man* can be considered as the development of this transcendental ontology into a system. These can be specially seen as an in-depth study of the kind of practical knowledge or theoretico-practical consciousness that is the theme of the third book of the *Vocation of Man*. The in-depth study of this consciousness (*Bewusst-Sein*)—in which criticism, dialectic, and ontology are closely intertwined—transforms the doctrine of science into a transcendental theory of appearance (*Erscheinung*), appearance of itself and of the Absolute.

Going back to the critique of Hegel, I think that his criticism carries out a limited and one-sided interpretation of the *Vocation of Man*. This is not only because he misunderstands its basic concepts (for example, the concept of *Glaube*), but above all because he does not catch the characteristic profile of this work. He does not realize what I have called a “transcendental ontology of human existence” developed in the dialectic of freedom. Now, the root of this inadequacy must be brought to light.

Both the *Vocation of Man* and *Faith and Knowledge* are transitional works. Fichte showcases in the *Vocation of Man*, especially in the third

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24. BM, GA I/6, 266: “eine andere und bessere Welt.”

book, a synthesis of the 'spiritual world,' a synthesis that, as he acknowledges in his correspondence with Schelling, must be further developed. In the *Exposition of the Doctrine of Science* 1801–1802 Fichte developed within his transcendental system that same synthesis of the spiritual world he had presented in a popular way in the *Vocation of Man*. Now, the fact that the *Vocation of Man* is a popular and transitional work, not a systematic exposition of Fichte's new thoughts, helps explain Hegel's one-sided interpretation. On the other hand, *Faith and Knowledge* is just a moment in the development into a form of the system—on the spur of the Schellingian system of identity—of Hegel's juvenile ideal, which was inspired by the thought of life as "a union of union, and non-union."<sup>26</sup> In this writing, Hegel wants to tie up all the loose ends of the "philosophy of reflection of subjectivity" in the name of speculation as "a living intuition of absolute life"<sup>27</sup>—as it is expressed in the *Difference*—in which the law of reflection given to it by reason and through which it becomes reason is the law of self-destruction. The "system-projects" of the Jena years bear witness to the development of this idea of speculation and also offer a meaningful anticipation of the mature system. Hegel sees Fichte's philosophical attitude solely as a "moment of the supreme idea."<sup>28</sup> It appears to be only the philosophy of formal infinitude, which is supposed to be succeeded by the Hegelian philosophy of the Absolute.

In fact, there are two different projects for a system announced in the *Vocation of Man* and in *Faith and Knowledge*, each the expression of two very different ideas of philosophy. Hegel wants a system of the *Absolute* as identity of identity and nonidentity. Fichte thinks that there is not a system of the Absolute, but of *knowledge* (*Wissen, Bewusst-Sein*) as "existence (*Dasein*) of the Absolute." In Hegel's case, since the Absolute and its manifestation, in other words, reason, are "one and the same thing,"<sup>29</sup> the system as self-consciousness of reason is the self-development and return of the Absolute into the totality of its moments. Thus, philosophy is "onto-logic": it is the scientific exposition of the Absolute in its self-determination and

25. The draft letter to Schelling of December 1800 (GA III/4, 404ff.); 27 Dec 1800 letter (GA III/4, 406ff.); and 31 May 1801 letter (GA III/5, 43ff.).

26. G. W. F. Hegel, *Systemfragment*, in *Hegels Theologische Jugendschriften*, ed. H. Nohl (Tübingen: 1907; new edition, Frankfurt a.M: Minerva, 1966), 348.

27. *Differenz des Fichte'schen und Schelling'schen Systems der Philosophie*, HW, II, 113: "lebendiges Anschauen des absoluten Lebens."

28. GW, HW II, 432: "Moment der höchsten Idee."

29. *Differenz*, HW II, 17: "ein und dasselbe ist."



self-knowing through division. "Putting being into non-being, as a becoming, the division in the Absolute, as its manifestation, the finite in the infinite as life: that is the task of philosophy."<sup>30</sup> These are expressions of the *Difference*, but I believe they embody very well the whole Hegelian program. In Fichte's case, the system is the reflecting self-comprehension of reason, not of the Absolute. It highlights the fact that the fulfillment of comprehension coincides with the self-knowledge of reason as (only) manifestation, image, or scheme of the Absolute. This is present in the image, but as the unity of being and life, it at the same time transcends the image itself. So, transcendental philosophy is "epistemology," a knowing of knowing, an image of an image. It is ontology *only* as epistemology, the thought of being ("onto-logy") *only* through the comprehension of knowledge as an appearance (*Erscheinung*), the image of being itself. This means that for transcendental philosophy, reason is not the Absolute, but merely the appearance of the Absolute, which in its turn is the root and being of the same appearance, though differentiated from it according to an antinomian dialectic. Phenomenology is not a transitory moment in the path toward absolute knowledge, but as a doctrine of appearance, it is the permanent shape of absolute knowledge (*absolutes Wissen*).

Now, if philosophy is and remains, even in postmodern times, the rational comprehension of reality, I believe that Fichte's idea of philosophy as epistemology, in other words, as an ontology of the constitution of the sense of knowledge connected with the ontology of human existence caught in its transcendental opening toward the infiniteness of the sense thanks to the dialectic of freedom, seems to widen the horizon of comprehension of *experience* in the totality and complexity of its moments more than Hegel's system of the Absolute. Fichte's transcendental philosophy as a system of freedom turns out to be more dynamic and ductile than Hegelian "onto-logic." However, this does not mean that we should forget Hegel. The fact that we work on the transcendental program does not exclude at all the building of a constructive comparison with the Hegelian program, but it might nevertheless call for a selective resumption and a new evaluation of some of its basic concepts—for example, the ones deriving from what Hegel calls "philosophy of objective spirit," from Hegel's theory of *Ethos*—in the transcendental perspective outlined by Kant and Fichte.

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30. *Differenz*, HW II, 25: "Die Aufgabe der Philosophie besteht aber darin . . . das Sein in das Nichtsein—als Werden, die Entzweiung in das Absolute—als dessen Erscheinung, das Endliche in das Unendliche—als Leben zu setzen."

# The Vocation of Postmodern Man

## Why Fichte Now? Again!

ARNOLD FARR

### Introduction: Why Fichte Now? Again!

We know that one of the main tasks of philosophy, or at least for the *Wissenschaftslehre*, is to explain the very possibility of philosophy. I would like to add to this task the following for those of us who do the history of philosophy. In choosing to study the work of a particular philosopher or philosophy we must ask, "Why this philosopher or philosophy?" and, "Why now?" I don't think that we have chosen to do philosophy because one day as we were living in our parents' basement they approached us and said, "You should do something with your life, why don't you go to the university and get a PhD in philosophy?"

Most of us become philosophers because we are driven by burning questions birthed by our desire to better understand the human condition. There is a kind of moral imperative here. Philosophy is often a response to a call (in the words of Gabriel Marcel) that results from an experience of the disquiet of one's fundamental situation in life.<sup>1</sup> The philosophers

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1. Gabriel Marcel, *Tragic Wisdom and Beyond*, trans. Stephen Jolin (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 6.

whom we study often provide us with intellectual tools for making sense of things. However, with the ebb and flow of life philosophers come in and go out of fashion. Hence, the relevance of a philosopher for a given historical era must be addressed. This chapter is an attempt to do just that via some reflections on Fichte's *The Vocation of Man* and its relevance for the contemporary philosophical landscape. This present project is inspired on the one hand by Dan Breazeale's attempt to do the same in a 1991 article entitled "Why Fichte Now?"<sup>2</sup> and on the other hand by the rise and now apparent waning of postmodernism.

I use the term *waning* with respect to postmodernism here with caution. The influence of postmodernism is still very visible. However, the impact is not as great as it was in the 1980s and '90s. It is also the case that across the United States that many theorists (who were once sympathetic to postmodernism) are in search of the next thing. In the past few years we have even seen conferences organized around the question "What after postmodernism?" People have begun to talk about the aftermath of postmodernism. This present project then has its home in a historical context that is very similar to the historical context that gave birth to Breazeale's "Why Fichte Now?" article, but almost twenty years later, while there has not been a complete paradigm shift, there has been a paradigm withering. Hence, the question "Why Fichte now?" is not quite the same question as it was almost twenty years ago. Before answering the question of "Why Fichte now? again!" it would be helpful to briefly discuss the contributions of postmodern theory.

### Postmodernism's Challenge to Philosophy and its Political Relevance

In spite of its many problems, postmodern theory has made enormous contributions to the contemporary theoretical landscape. These contributions are too many to discuss here. In this chapter, I will restrict my discussion to what I take to be a couple of postmodernism's most important contributions to political theory.

There are several clarifications to be made before we proceed. First, we should not confuse postmodern theory with postmodern man nor the so-called postmodern condition.

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2. Daniel Breazeale, "Why Fichte Now?" *The Journal of Philosophy* LXXXVIII, no. 10 (October 1991): 524–31.

Secondly, we must not situate the postmodern as necessarily following the modern in a temporal manner. Finally, postmodern theory is very diverse. Therefore, a criticism of one postmodern theorist might not apply to another. In fact, at times, some postmodernists are quite modern.

With respect to the first clarification, the three terms are all connected but not identical. That is, postmodern man and the postmodern condition may be objects of study for postmodern theory but postmodern theory is not limited to these two objects of study. In fact, postmodern theory takes itself to be an analysis of modern man and modern theory. The "post" enters when modern theories about the human person and the human condition are discovered to reflect a condition that is opposite of what modern thinkers claim. Hence, the postmodern condition refers to the condition of knowledge. It refers to a rupture in traditional epistemologies, a rupture so great that epistemology itself becomes almost impossible. Postmodern man refers to the fragmentation of the subject. There are two specific problems that I want to focus on here as they are relevant to political theory and to my reading of Fichte.

While I'm more concerned with social/political and perhaps moral problems here and not epistemology, the postmodern critique of knowledge has serious implications for social and political theory. So, the first problem that I will address is the problem of systematic knowledge. The second and most important problem for our purposes is the theory of the subject. Both problems, however, are interconnected.

While the problem of the systematic unity of knowledge is an epistemological problem it has serious social and political implications when applied to a theory of the human person. In postmodern literature (philosophical or otherwise) terms such as grand narratives or master narratives are used to designate theories or philosophies that claim access to universal Truth or truths, systematic unity, and pure objectivity. The postmodern critique tries to show that all such systems are not based on a view from nowhere, but are historically, socially, embodied forms of knowledge.<sup>3</sup> These systems also contain gaps, fissures, disunities, and an ignored outside that makes closure and systematic unity impossible.

We may say that to some extent knowledge is itself narratively situated. That is, what is called knowledge emerges from a particular form of life with its interests, political and social organization, methods of inquiry,

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3. Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and The Discourse on Language*, trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972).

worldviews, questions, etc. The existence of alternative forms of life are either excluded from the narrative in the way that Hegel excluded Africa from the world historical unfolding of *Geist* or they are placed at the bottom of a social hierarchy, as Kant did with Africans and Native Americans. These systems of thought never achieve full closure because of the counternarrative that lies outside of them as remainder.

More important for our purposes here is the postmodern critique of subjectivity. Postmodernists are basically united in their rejection of a unified subject. On this score they all appear to be rather anti-Fichtean, there is no I, there is no self-positing. While there are several postmodern theories of the subject, there are two in particular that I want to draw attention to. First, there is the problem of fragmentation. Here, there is no unified, autonomous subject. There are merely subject positions, or functions. Secondly, what we call the subject is nothing more than a bodily intersection where certain social forces meet. On this Foucaultian account the subject is a product of power. While the problems of fragmentation and power are related I want to treat them separately for now for the purposes of clarification.

The problem of fragmentation originates in a Marxist-influenced strand of postmodernism. Here, we would include thinkers such as Jameson, Mouffe, Laclau, and Adorno. The idea is that the capitalist mode of production fragments the worker. This idea is expressed in the work of Georg Lukács. The seeds were sown by Marx himself in volume one of *Capital*. Following Marx, Lukács claims that “the unity of a product as a commodity no longer coincides with its unity as a use-value.”<sup>4</sup> This disunity between a product and its use-value produces further disunities such as the disunity of the subject. Lukács goes on:

In the second place, this fragmentation of the object of production necessarily entails the fragmentations of the subject. In consequence of the rationalism of the work-process the human qualities and idiosyncrasies of the worker appear increasingly as *mere sources of error* when contrasted with these abstract special laws functioning according to rational predictions. Neither objectively nor in his relation to his work does man appear as the authentic master of the process; on the contrary, he is a mechanical part incorporated into a mechanical system. He finds it already pre-existing and self-sufficient, it functions independently

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4. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 89.

of him and he has to conform to its laws whether he likes it or not. As labour is progressively rationalized and mechanized his lack of will is reinforced by the way in which his activity becomes less and less active and more and more *contemplative*.<sup>5</sup>

This fragmentation of the subject captures what Horkheimer and Adorno mean in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* by the claim that human qualities are being replaced by functions. In fact, the whole human being is reduced to a function in the capitalist system.<sup>6</sup> The worker earns enough wages to merely maintain his/her existence so that he or she can continue to work and produce wealth for the owners and managers of the means of production. Hence, the worker has no value beyond labor-power, which is used for the benefit of someone else.<sup>7</sup>

Michel Foucault and his followers claim that the subject is the result of a series of discursive practices. Social values are literally written on the body.<sup>8</sup> For example, the child who is born with external male genitalia is forced or at least encouraged to engage in what we would call masculine practices. The masculine subject is produced by avoiding so-called feminine practices. Judith Butler has extended Foucault's insights by synthesizing them with Althusser's notion of interpellation. This is of importance to us here. Interpellation is the act of calling a subject into being. In Fichtean language we may refer to this as a summons. However, for Butler and Althusser, interpellation occurs within the context of a certain ideology that attempts to enslave rather than free the subject. Here, one is summoned not to act freely or merely limit one's freedom so that others may have their proper share of the freedom pie. Instead, one is summoned to submit to some system of domination. However, there is never one single act of interpellation from one single source. For Butler, a space of resistance is possible because interpellation often misses its mark. This is especially true if there are multiple acts of interpellation.<sup>9</sup> For example, one

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5. Ibid.

6. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1993).

7. The point being made by Horkheimer and Adorno is best understood if read within the context of Marx's theory of alienation. See Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," in Karl Marx: *Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 83–121.

8. Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 148–50.

9. "'Conscience Doth Make Subjects of Us All': Althusser's Subjection," in *The Psychic Life of Power* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 106–31.

might think of the dual interpellation from opposing systems of thought experienced by African Americans as they are called to self-degradation in a racist society yet are expected to embody so-called Christian values.<sup>10</sup>

### Postmodernism's Political Paralysis

The emancipatory potential of postmodernism lies in its dismantling of oppressive master narratives. Hegemonic discourses that tend to advantage certain social groups over others have been exposed. This dismantling of hegemonic discourses has revealed to us that the emperor has no clothes. The deconstruction of such discourses promises the emergence of a new era, one that is no longer dominated by oppressive worldviews and closed exclusionary systems of thought. However, as the postmodernists were revealing the nakedness of the emperor they began taking off their own clothes. We found ourselves bearing witness to an intellectual striptease or a theoretical orgy of sorts. In the minds of many young postmodern groupies, critical thinking was reduced to a mere flipping of the bird to master narratives. This led to a political paralysis that was counter to the intentions of postmodern theorists. It is in this context that many contemporary thinkers are asking "What now?" It is in this context that we should ask, Why Fichte now? Again! In the remainder of this chapter I will attempt a reading of Fichte's *Vocation of Man* from the perspective of one who believes that the postmodern parade was not fruitless but rather it made important contributions to human thought and also made it necessary to read the Western philosophical tradition through new lenses. However, while my reading is not in conflict with the spirit of Fichte's text it does suggest using Fichte to go beyond Fichte. I will also argue that in some ways Fichte's methodology is not completely antithetical to postmodern methodology. Yet, Fichte also allows us to avoid the political paralysis of postmodernism.

That is, the postmodern critique of subjectivity does not only destabilize the fixed Cartesian subject, it comes close to dismissing the possibility of agency altogether. While Fichte's account of subjectivity destabilizes the fixed Cartesian subject, there is still subjectivity and agency that hovers between possibilities. In the *Wissenschaftslehre* of 1794–95 and the *Wis-*

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10. See Arnold Farr, "The Smartest Black Man in Union, South Carolina: Complimentary Racism and the Dialectic of Marginalization," in *Marginal Groups and Mainstream Americal Culture*, ed. Yolanda Estes, Arnold Farr, Patricia Smith, and Clelia Smyth (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2000), 115.

*senschaftslehre nova methodo* the I (subject) hovers between determinacy and indeterminacy. Hence, the destabilized subject is a form of determinate destabilization that hovers between determinate possibilities. How is this possible? Within the context of *The Vocation of Man* this cannot be addressed until Book Three. For now, we must work through Fichte's struggle in Books One and Two.

### Book One and the Impossibility of Theoretical Closure

Books One and Two of the *Vocation of Man* are both attempts to secure knowledge in a unified system. Both attempts fail due to a rupture in the would-be system of knowledge. Fichte's approach in Book One reminds one of the Hegelian procedure of following a line of argument until it dead-ends, thereby revealing the weakness or untenability of the argument.

In Book One, Fichte assumes the position of a hardcore empiricist for whom all knowledge must be based on empirical observation as well as rationalists such as Spinoza.<sup>11</sup> "I have given credence only to the confirmation of my senses, only to consistent experience."<sup>12</sup> Through the use of the senses the observer discovers the principle of necessary connection.

I was satisfied only after I had insight into their exact connection, only after I could explain one by the other and deduce one from the other, being able to calculate the results in advance and confirm by observation that the results occurred as I had calculated them. I am, therefore, as sure of the accuracy of this part of my knowledge as I am of my own existence; I walk about firmly in that part of my world with which I am acquainted and at every moment stake my existence and well-being on the validity of my convictions.<sup>13</sup>

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11. Fichte attacks any form of dogmatism that denies the freedom of the individual human I. Such dogmatism is found in both the empiricist and the rationalist traditions. Book One of *The Vocation of Man* is as much an attack on Spinoza as it is on any empiricist. There are several clear criticisms of Spinoza in *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre* as well as in the 1794–95 *Wissenschaftslehre*. I would like to thank Dan Breazeale and Wayne Martin for reminding me of Fichte's critique of Spinoza during a conversation after the reading of this paper in March 2010.

12. VM, 3.

13. Ibid.



However, as soon as the observer feels secure in the knowledge gained through his/her observations, a rupture occurs. This rupturing begins in the form of a question, "But—what am I myself, and what is my vocation?"<sup>14</sup>

There are two things that will constitute the remainder of Book One. First, the observer, Fichte, will attempt to make himself fit into this mechanistic system. Secondly, this very attempt will deconstruct. To some degree the system itself will deconstruct due to the fact that it contains its other. The system has a remainder that does not allow closure of the system. It is important to remind ourselves here how deconstruction functions. That which is deconstructed is not deconstructed from the outside. Deconstruction is an internal operation, it is always auto-deconstruction. Just as for Hegel the dialectic is not a method that one applies to phenomena because things are themselves dialectical, for Derrida things deconstruct themselves.

There is a second point that I should make here regarding deconstruction. We might say that the rupture that occurs in Book One is the work of *différance*. The term *différance* suggests the dual acts of differing and deferring at the same time.<sup>15</sup> The dogmatist line of argument in Book One is a reduction to sameness of all empirical phenomena. By "sameness" I merely mean that all empirical phenomena are taken to be mechanistically determined. However, there is something that is within, is a part of this mechanistic system that differs from all other phenomena in this system. The I. This difference also suggest a deference. Here, it is a deferring of causality.

In Book One, Fichte himself defers in order to support the view that the world and everything in it is a mathematically determined system. With regard to knowledge of his vocation he defers to others.

If I only know what I am convinced of and have found out myself, then indeed I cannot say that I have the least knowledge about my vocation; I only know what others claim to know about it; and all I can say here with any assurance is that I have heard people say such and such about these matters.<sup>16</sup>

He defers again when he attributes all causality to an original force of nature. The purpose of deference in both cases is to deny deference,

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14. Ibid.

15. Jacques Derrida, "Difference," in *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 129–30.

16. VM, 4.

difference, *différance*. It is Fichte in his role as mere observer who defers in an attempt to view himself as a member of nature's causal series. This is necessary in the context of Book One because knowledge is not possible unless we view the world as a determined system that discloses its workings to the senses.

In Book One, Fichte manages to subsume all parts of himself, even thinking, under the laws of nature. However, there is a part of himself that does not seem to fit this schema.

So it must be my thinking and willing. I want to will with freedom according to a freely conceived purpose, and this will, as simply the most fundamental cause determined by no higher possible cause, is to move and shape in the first place my body and by means of it the world which surrounds me.<sup>17</sup>

He continues:

My acts are to result from this will, and without it no acts of mine are to take place at all, in that there is to be no other possible power of my acts than my will. Only as determined by my will and in its service is my power to take a hand in nature. I want to be the master of nature and it is to be my servant: I want to have an influence on nature proportional to my power, but nature is to have none on me.<sup>18</sup>

There seems to be a part of the system of nature that actively rebels against the system of nature. The I as a willing being is this rupture that does not permit closure to the system of nature. The attempt to construct nature and all of its content has been deconstructed. The remainder has been revealed. The task now is to rethink matters from another perspective, that of absolute freedom.

### Books Two and Three, the Nontheoretical Foundation of Knowledge

While the strategy of Book Two is very different from that of Book One, the problem is the same. There is an attempt to unify knowledge in such

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17. Ibid., 21.

18. Ibid., 21–22.

a way that it constitute an enclosed system with no outside remainder. In this case, Spirit attempts to convince the I that the perceptions the I has of the external world are not representations of external things. The I has direct access to these perceptions. Hence, our perceptions do not lie outside in objects external to us or some substratum of the objects that we do not have direct access to. These perceptions are all contained within the I. The I itself may be seen as an enclosed system of perceptions. All difference, all *différance* undergoes erasure. "In all perceptions you only perceive your own condition."<sup>19</sup> The goal here, as in Book One, is to find security in one's knowledge of the world. Once again, it is a security that cannot be had.

We see in Book Two that there is a deconstruction of the outside world, the world of appearances. All perceptions lie not outside of the I but within the I. However, this is the least of our problems. Things get worse. Eventually, the I itself gets deconstructed. The I has learned that the content (objects) of consciousness cannot be explained by appealing to a world of objects outside of consciousness. Only the laws of consciousness can explain the content of consciousness. However, what about the I's consciousness of itself? The I invokes something like Kant's transcendental unity of apperception when it claims that "it is evident that a consciousness of "I" accompanies all my presentations, is necessarily present in them even if it is not always explicitly noticed by me, and that at each moment of my consciousness I say: 'I,I,I, and always I'—that is 'I,' and *not the particular thing outside of me of which I think at this moment.*"<sup>20</sup> What is the nature of this I that accompanies all of my presentations? Is it a substance of some sort? Is it an object that can be known? What does it mean to say "I,I,I, and always I"? Does the saying of "I" constitute a unity or is it merely the attempt to unify presentations, even the presentation of the I itself? The conclusion drawn in Book Two is that the I is a pure invention. Nothing inside nor outside the I endures. There is only change and thought in the midst of change. Compare this insight with a statement by Derrida.

Nothing—no present and in-different being—thus precedes *différance* and spacing. There is no subject who is agent, author, and master of *différance*, who eventually and empirically would be overtaken by *différance*. Subjectivity—like objectivity—is an effect of *différance*, an effect inscribed in the system of *différance*.<sup>21</sup>

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19. Ibid., 29.

20. Ibid., 63.

21. Jacques Derrida, *Positions*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1981), 28.

Derrida's point is that there is no subject who exist prior to *différance* and is then overtaken or affected by *différance*. It is in the play of *différance* that the subject or subjectivity is constituted. The position that Spirit leads the I to in *The Vocation of Man* is very similar. The subject or the I seem to be an afterthought. All presentations are modifications in consciousness and are either immediate or mediated. That in consciousness which is immediate is called the I. However, this I is merely an invention to explain that which is always immediate and always present in consciousness.

Although Fichte has been viewed as a member of the Cartesian tradition with distinction, we see here a clear move away from anything like a Cartesian subject. The I (subject) as the foundation of knowledge is completely dismantled. However, this dismantling of the subject does not eliminate subjectivity altogether. It is the case, though, that subjectivity gets radically redefined. To the extent that some form of subjectivity and agency remains, Fichte is not quite a postmodernist. It is in Book Three that we get this new form of subjectivity. But, one last thing about Book Two.

Just as in Book One, there is a rupture that refuses closure to the system. Not only is there a rupture in the system of knowledge that Spirit attempts to help the I construct, there is a rupture in what was at first a civil conversation between the I and Spirit. The last couple of pages of Book Two disclose the development of hostilities between the I and Spirit.

The I: You are a malicious spirit. Your knowledge itself is malice, and derives from malice, and I cannot be grateful that you have brought me along this road.<sup>22</sup>

Spirit; Shortsighted fellow! People like you call it wickedness if one dares to see what there is, and if one sees as far as they do and further.<sup>23</sup>

Spirit; I wanted to free you from your false knowledge, not to teach you the truth.<sup>24</sup>

Spirit: You wanted to know about your knowledge. Are you surprised that on this road too you learned about nothing more than your knowledge, which is what you wanted; and would you have it some other way? What comes to be in and through

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22. VM, 64.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

knowledge is only knowledge. But all knowledge is only a depicting, and in it something is always demanded which would correspond to the image. This demand can be satisfied by no knowledge, and a system of knowledge is necessarily a system of mere images, without any reality, meaning, and purpose. Did you expect something else? Do you want to change the inner nature of your mind and expect your knowledge to be more than knowledge?<sup>25</sup>

Hence, we conclude this book with the realization that mere knowledge is not enough to help man fulfill his vocation.

### Striving: The Vocation of Postmodern Man or Man as Such

In Books One and Two we witnessed a rupture in the epistemological or theoretical quest for knowledge. In both cases the rupture was caused by the demand of practical reason. In Book One, practical reason demands that the I be the source of its own activity. In Book Two, practical reason demands that the I be more than a knower. The demand that hovers over the I in Book Two receives a certain degree of clarification in Book Three. The practical demand in Book One required the I to attribute causality to itself for the fulfillment of duty. The practical demand that forms the bridge between the I's dissatisfaction toward the end of Book Two with the Spirit's claims and the requirement to believe in the reality of the external world in Book Three.

My view is that Book Three of the *Vocation of Man* offers some helpful insights for grappling with fragmented, postmodern humanity. It also creates new problems, which are subject to a postmodern as well as a modern critique. The problem that Fichte struggled with throughout the vast portion of the *Wissenschaftslehre* is the unity of the subject. The same struggle occurs in postmodernism. However, in postmodernism the problem is more severe because according to some postmodern theorists there is no subject. It is not my belief that Fichte solves the postmodern problem of subjectivity, but rather, that there is a fruitful conversation to be had between Fichte and postmodernists that points toward new ways of thinking about the human subject and its vocation. This conversation

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25. Ibid., 64–65.

is not based on a direct opposition between Fichte and postmodernists but on their difference and a certain affinity.

The common ground shared by Fichte and postmodernists is their dismantling of what is commonly called the Cartesian subject. In Fichte's case there is no complete break with the Cartesian subject but there is a shaking of the foundations in the Cartesian family. The Cartesian subject is the simply the given Archimedean point, or foundation upon which knowledge is built. Such a subject is self-contained, autonomous, singular, etc. Fichte remains in the Cartesian tradition to the extent that he too makes the I self-positing, autonomous, and the foundation of knowledge. However, Fichte's subject is not quite as stable as Descartes's insofar as for Fichte the subject is a divided subject that strives to unify itself. The dichotomy between Books One and Two of *The Vocation of Man* in a way that is less clear than in some of Fichte's other writings represents a dichotomy within the human subject, the tension between the I as passive and the I as active, the I as caused and the I as causality. The problem is supposedly resolved in Book Three by simply asserting not necessarily the unity of the I, but rather, justified, even necessary belief in the external world. It seems that this belief is necessary to carry out the project of unifying oneself.

Earlier, I briefly discussed several postmodern theories of the subject and the problems that they face as they attempt to find in the fragmented subject or the subject without agency a space for resistance to oppressive and repressive social forces. Fichte and the postmodernists both recognize a disunity in the subject. However, their attitudes toward this disunity differ. For some postmodernists this disunity is to be celebrated. For Fichte, we strive to overcome this disunity.

There is also another difference between Fichte and the postmodernists regarding the disunity of the subject. For Fichte, the I itself is constituted by a fundamental disunity. The I belongs to two worlds, the sensible world wherein the I finds itself as a member of the causal series of nature as in Book One, and to the supersensible world wherein it finds itself as a kind of causality. Without this disunity there is no duty. For postmodernists the disunity or fragmentation of the I or subject occurs in different forms. For some theorists the subject is fragmented, because it is the result of various conflicting social forces, discourses, practices, and significations. Underneath these significations, discourses, etc., there is no subject. On another account there may be something like a subject, but what it is cannot be known since what is before us as subject is no pure subject, but rather, the signified in a chain of signifiers.

For now, I have no desire to address in detail those who want to deny subjectivity altogether. I said before that such a view not only leads to political paralysis; it also involves the postmodernists in a kind of performative contradiction insofar as he or she still calls for resistance to oppressive and repressive social forces. What is more interesting to me and is correct in my view is the postmodern view that the subject (however pure or impure) is constituted by a multiplicity of conflicting social forces, discourses, significations. This is why, despite my Fichtean leanings, I cannot believe that my desires (which are produced by the sensible world) and my duty (in terms of its specific content) are always clear.

My point is simply this: while one may be able to abstract from the empirical realm wherein consciousness operates, one can never purge consciousness of those empirical conditions. While Fichte's *Wissenschaftslehre* attempts to give an account of how consciousness in general arises, postmodernism urges us to pay attention to the ways in which specific forms of consciousness arise via various discursive practices. I think that this type of postmodern analysis is necessary if we are going to carry out Fichte's own suggestion that we strive to change the world for the better.

## Conclusion

Let me conclude by pointing out what I take to be one of the main contributions made by Fichte to contemporary postmodern worries, and then offer a criticism of Fichte, and then finally a solution to the problem. I said before that the willingness of some postmodernisms to dismiss the subject or moral agent can only lead to political paralysis. As many feminist thinkers who are influenced by postmodernism but critical of its dismissal of the subject have argued, "Just when some of us who have been denied subjectivity begin to have our subjectivity recognized we are told that there is no subject."<sup>26</sup> Fichte's philosophy in general rescues a form of subjectivity that cannot be reduced to the Cartesian subject. It is a subjectivity that is destabilized and must strive to create a unity within itself and in the world. The vocation of postmodern man and man (humanity) as such is to perpetually strive for unity. As Fichte tell us in "Some Lectures Concerning the Scholar's Vocation":

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26. bell hooks, "Postmodern Blackness," in *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 28.

Thus it is not man's vocation to reach this goal. But he can and should draw nearer to it, and his true vocation qua *man*, that is, insofar as a rational but finite, a sensuous but free being, lies in *endless approximation toward this goal*.<sup>27</sup>

However, there is a problem in *The Vocation of Man* that points toward a Fichtean paralysis. After disclosing the vocation of man in this world Fichte indicates that there is perhaps another higher vocation that seems to be required by some other world. He speculates that at some point humanity may reach its goal in this world. What then? Fichte writes:

But once it has been achieved and humanity has reached its goal, what will it do then? Beyond that condition there is no higher on earth. The generation which first has reached it can do nothing more than to persist in and vigorously maintain it, die, and leave offspring who will do the same as they have already done, and who in turn will leave offspring who do the same. Mankind would then have come to a halt on its path. Its earthly goal can, therefore, not be its highest goal. This earthly goal is understandable and attainable and finite.<sup>28</sup>

So, apparently, striving does come to an end and the ideal is attainable. Here, Fichte enters into a kind of metaphysical speculation that threatens to derail the great achievements of the *Wissenschaftslehre*. It seems that if the moral law is actualized on earth there is still some dissatisfaction. However, to dwell on this takes me beyond the scope of this chapter.

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27. Fichte, "Some Lectures Concerning the Scholar's Vocation," in *Fichte: Early Philosophical Writings*, trans. and ed. Daniel Breazeale (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), 152.

28. VM, 91.





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## PHILOSOPHY

Written for a general audience during a period of intense controversy in the German philosophical community, J. G. Fichte's short book *The Vocation of Man* (1800) is both an introduction to and a defense of his philosophical system, and is one of the best-known contributions to German Idealism. This collection of new essays reflects a wide and instructive variety of philosophical and hermeneutic approaches, which combine to cast new light upon Fichte's familiar text. The contributors highlight some of the overlooked complexities and implications of *The Vocation of Man* and situate it firmly within the intellectual context within which it was originally written, relating it to the positions of Kant, Hegel, Schelling, Schlegel, Jacobi, and others. In addition, the essays relate the text to issues of contemporary concern such as the limits of language, the character of rational agency, the problem of evil, the relation of theoretical knowledge to practical belief, and the dialectic of judgment.

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